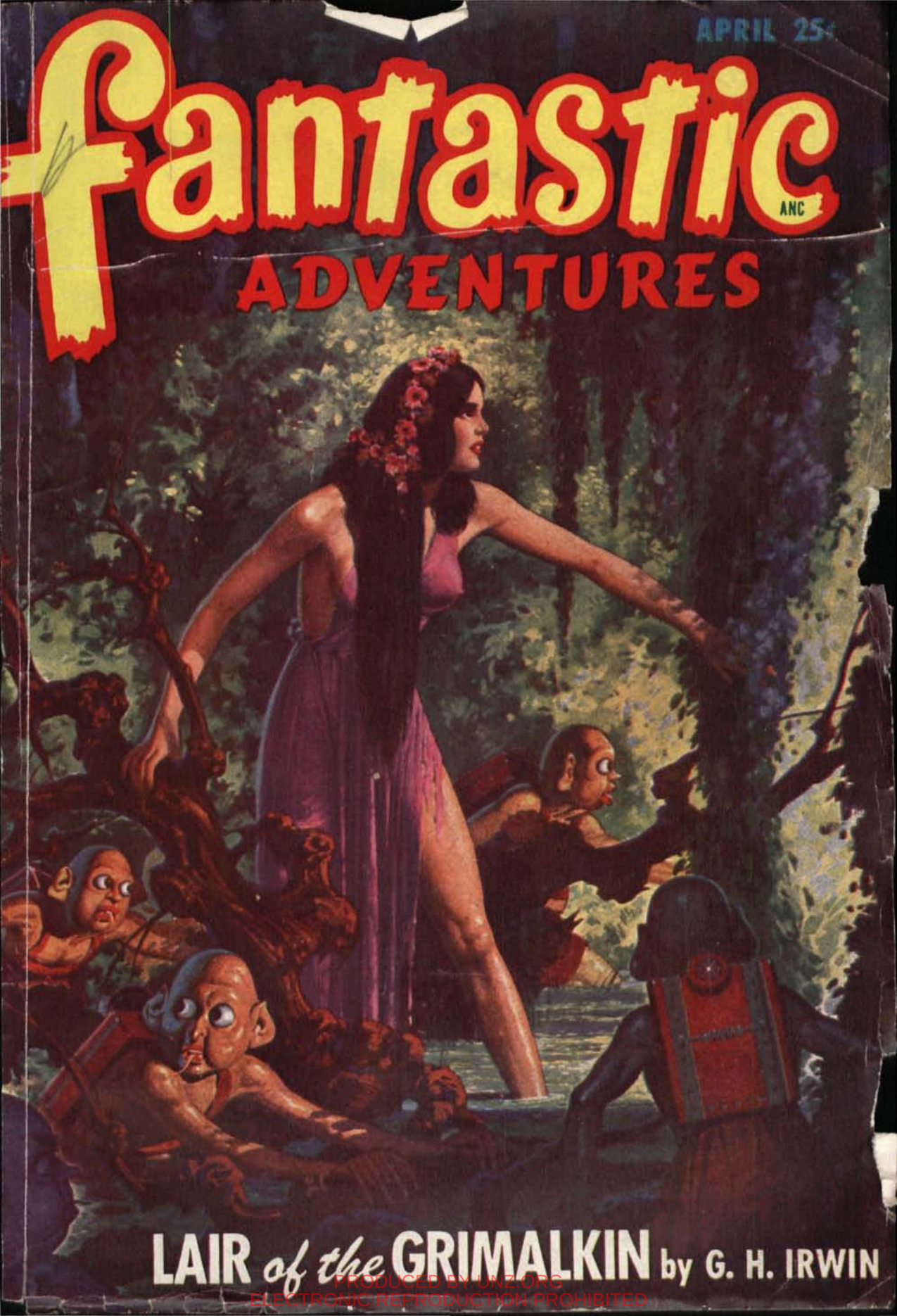

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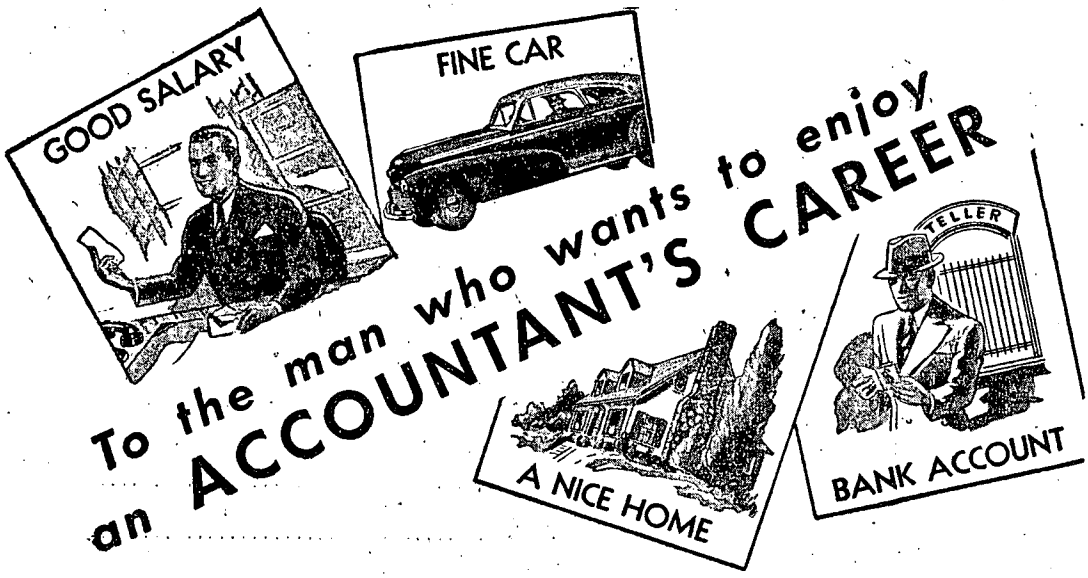

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All Stories Complete

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The Editor's Notebook

A CONFIDENTIAL CHAT WITH THE EDITOR

MOST of you readers of FA are also fans of our big sister magazine, *Amazing Stories.* So the name of G. H. Irwin will be no surprise to you on this month's cover. Many of you have written us in the past year asking whatever became of the author of the famous story, "The Vengeance Of Martin Brand." Well, we are happy to report that he's back after too long an absence, with a great short novel, "Lair Of The Grimalkin." Irwin has one of those styles of writing that is almost magnetic. Anyway, if you are gripped by his new story as much as we were when we first read it, you'll get what we mean. So we'll let you take off from here and enjoy some of the best fantasy reading you've had in a long time.

O. K. WE know you're nodding with approval at the new Bob Jones cover. But as good as this one is, wait until you see next month's! Bob is getting to be as much a part of FA as the title. And from where we're sitting that's pretty good! Anybody disagree?

"Consider yourselves invaded!"

S. M. TENNESHAW has done a lot of fine stories for some of our other magazines, like *Mammoth Western,* our temporarily suspended *Mammoth Detective,* and *Mammoth Mystery,* and of course, you have also seen his name in FA. Right now he's turning out some fine science-fantasy stories, and one of them is in this month's issue, entitled, "Who Sups With The Devil." You of course remember the old saying, "Who sups with the devil must have a long spoon . . ." Well, that will give you a rough idea of what the theme behind this neat little fantasy is. The story has a nice twist ending that we think you'll like.

FRANCES M. DEEGAN comes up this month with a sinister title, "The Cat-Snake." The story concerns a girl who is literally half-snake, half-cat. And then there's a young man who gets a fond feeling for her. But when it came to petting, while the cat in her purred, the snake coiled to strike . . .

"THE Curse Of Ra" is the latest story to come from H. B. Hickey's pen. This fantasy gives an Oriental flavor to the issue, and after you sample it you'll agree that the flavor is just right! Joe Tillotson did a nice job of illustrating for this yarn. (Of course, the same holds true for the other illustrations in the book. We're mighty proud of our artists—they're the best in the field!)

WE'RE presenting a new auther this month, Robert Wade. He brings you a fantasy laid on Mars, entitled, "Coffin Of Life And Death." This is one of those stories that is both interplanetary and fantasy at the same time. A mighty good combination we think you'll agree. Anyway, let us know how you liked it.

BACK again this month is Lee Francis. Lee is getting to be mighty popular after his recent novel, "Zero A.D." This month he presents a novelette, entitled, "Flight Into Fog." And a humdinger of a yarn it is too! Just keep them coming, Lee!

FINISHING up this month is old-timer, top-favorite, William P. McGivern, continuing the adventures of the three musketeers in, "The Wandering Swordsmen." Remember the first of the series, "The Haunted Bookshelf"? You'll remember this one too! . . . Which winds up shop for this month. Be seeing you.....WLH

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LAIR OF THE GRIMALKIN

by G. H. IRWIN

Farar stood coolly on the tree trunk and sent shot after shot straight

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at the monster's hideous head—and roars of pain filled the air . . .

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Earthmen had established bases on the planet Venus, and life went onward—except for the unlucky ones who ventured into the dreaded area of Granlor—and the *Grimalkin*

FARAR pulled up his native dugout and strode up the trail to the big plastic bubble that was the compound of the Venus Mines and Export, Inc. He hated the place, but he was a hunter and the trail led . . .

Farar was hunting the greatest quarry any earthman had ever trailed. The Grimalkin was *not* a "legend" to the web-fingered natives who had told him it nested in the depths of Granlor. Granlor was a vast swamp called *Despair* by the earthmen.

In his hand was a .40 caliber Winchester rifle with telescopic sights which had cost his dead father a small fortune twenty years ago. Incongruously, slung at his belt was a frying pan, the web-fingers of the tall greenies were partial to frying pans. Across his wide lean shoulders cartridge belts were festooned, you couldn't leave the bright things around, either, they'd be stolen. And everything that had weight and came from earth cost ten times its weight in gold here.

Farar had a lead on the Grimalkin. One of the greenies had *yarvaed* him—that a man in the mining compound had photographs of some Bunaes. *Bunaes?* Well . . . always found where the Grimalkin nested. *Yarva?* That's thought-talk, greenhorn!

* * *

On Venus there were many areas still feared, uninhabitable, swarming with the unconquerable fecundity of alien life. Life-forms so destructive the earthmen had no weapon to meet their threat.

In 2020, forty years after the first ship flamed down through the cloud layer, there were whole continental areas which explorers, prospectors and even army expeditions from earth had entered—never to return!

Of all the places earth-men had learned *not* to go into, the one most shunned was an area called Granlor by the green-skinned Venusians. On the error-filled maps of the difficult planet, it was labeled the *Swamps of Despair,* at the headwaters of the mighty *River of Doubt.*

* * *

The man to whom Farar's trail led was a youngster of twenty-two named Hal Worran. The pictures Farar's native *yarva* had mentioned (to Worran known to no one but himself) were a series of color-photo shots of the Swamps of Despair. They had cost his brother his life, and he wasn't showing them to any but the right man.

His brother, before his death of acid burnt lungs, acids distilled by the flesh-eating plants of the swamps, had gasped out a tale of a mountain of platinum ore, of a terrifying monster, of a young witch . . . delirium, Hal feared.

But the pictures could hardly be called delirium, and they proved two of his brother's statements to the hilt.

They were filled with strange and dreadful beauty, those swamp scenes. The eerie, irresistible lure of perfumed, poisonous plants—sweetly bit-

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ter blooms that lifted on their great mottled stalks of pale green—lifted strange cups of distilled acids that dripped slowly down the stalks and into the dead black water.

That black water rippled silently, heavily; under the ripples moved the gaping mouths of serpentine horrors; tremendous, unknown, destructive life-forms occurring in the fearful, man-shunned swamps; purple and gold and snake-god beautiful—but terrifically, venomously able to destroy. Heavy orchids leaned their faces to be seen with vague roots dangling white and airy, like ghosts of plants yet to be.

THE gigantic cypress of Venus, which is to the earth cypress what the redwood is to the evergreens—drips soft, grey, mossy limbs, and slow, dreadful air movements shift the shrouding mists. Here and there the cypress knees protrude like pointed, gigantic skulls, and the fierce lilies sway softly, their white and writhing pistils poised to strike their venom into any passing life—red are the lilies' faces, like shed blood—and their leaves are black as death. The great white horn snake coils and crawls, or poises waiting for prey. The dim white-green of the swamp is the most striking and prevalent color—the heavy mists join with the cloud curtains higher to shut out all light but a dim green radiance peculiar to the swamps called Despair. The projections fascinated Worran.

"She lives in there," murmured Hal Worran to the tall, lean prospector he had met but an hour before. Hal had let it be known he had a lead on a platinum vein, and wanted experienced help to pin the lead down. The man had come knocking at his door, tall, pale and diffident—but with the scars and tough, worn clothing of the jungle guide to recommend him.

He had been telling him of the legends of the swamps of Despair, of the beautiful witch said to inhabit the depths of the swamp, and to emerge periodically to bring her magic to the people.

The man grunted, smiled slightly at the foolish tale. "Nobody can live in there, Worran."

Hal stopped the film. He changed the adjustment to make a still projection, inserted a tiny segment of film, snapped the switch.

"Notice that hill in the background, Farar?" The man had given his name as Farar, Frank Farar—born on Venus thirty years before. He must have been one of the first children in the first earth colony. Hal was glad that someone who knew Venus as well as a native had turned up. He needed this man.

Farar grunted again, giving his voice the nasal tang that only native Venusians use. Hal went on. "Note on the color film the peculiar deep black of the water. In the foreground the water is deep green. The hill itself is black as pitch. I think the whole hill is Polyxene! Platinum ore!"

"You think the water gets a stain from the earth of the hill, and that it is platinum ore. Water won't dissolve platinic oxide!"

"This water will. It's full of swamp acid, and some of that acid is nitric and hydrochloric. It's been analyzed."

"What are you telling me this for. You don't know me well enough to trust me."

Hal grinned confidently. "Listen, Farar, I'm not worrying about anyone fool enough to go into the swamp without certain things I've learned. He wouldn't come out. You either take me along, or you die in there. Get it?"

"I get it. You know something you aren't spilling. But I'm not entering

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myself without proof you can stay alive."

"I've got proof right here. But I don't know whether it will scare you or not. It's a weird kind of proof—but man *can* live in that swamp!"

Hal bent over the projector again, taking out the fragment of film, inserting another.

"I clipped these pieces from the films brought out of the swamp by my brother before anyone else saw them. He was out of his head, kept talking about the Witch of the Swamp and I thought he was raving. But, look at the proof . . ."

Hal snapped the switch, and the screen glowed again with the unearthly, poisonously lovely colors of the Swamp of Despair.

IT WAS nearly the same scene, of the low black hill rising like the back of a monster out of the slow-heaving black water. But coming down the slope was a creature, too far off to be seen, and following the figure were a number of smaller man-like figures.

Hal pulled out the film, and put in another fragment. "Now gaze on this and tell me men can't live in that swamp."

"H'mmmm! Brownies! They are a legend of Venus, a dwarf race once supposed to dominate the planet, now vanished. I've seen some of their sculptures in ruins. That's the original dominant race of Venus, Worran! *Bunaes* in Venusian."

"The girl is what interests me most. Just how do you explain her, Mr. Experience?"

She had passed in front of the camera for a brief instant, and Hal had clipped from the film the few photos where she appeared. She was twice as tall as her dwarfish companions, dressed in a torn one-piece garment, her limbs bare and her white flanks spattered with green mud. Her hair hung over her small, firm breasts, her mouth open as if she were running, indeed if it had been enough film to show it, she would undoubtedly have been splashing along rapidly, for the water dripped from her legs and flew before her where her flying feet struck. The great lovely swamp flowers made a coronet about her dark flying locks, and the little men about her were looking apprehensively both ahead and back, as if fleeing in fear of some terrible danger which might strike from an unknown quarter; some danger which they would avoid if they reached a sanctuary toward which they ran.

Hal snapped off the light, the scene vanished, and Farar sighed—as at the dispelling of a lovely dream.

"Some girl, eh, Worran! Wonder who in hell she is, with her friends the non-existent and extinct Brownies . . . Impossible but true!"

"That was the legendary Witch of the Swamp. You have heard the natives talk of her, now you've seen her photograph. You don't doubt your own eyes, do you?"

"That legend is a heck of a lot older than that girl was. She can't be twenty . . ."

Hal laughed. "If she can live in there, so can we."

FARAR shook his head. "Those little people knew a hell of a lot more about this planet than we do, Worran. She lives there because they show her how. The native Venusians don't go in that swamp either. Their big feet don't help them any against the swamp death in Despair. The mud doesn't get them, but the air does. It's poisonous; it *seems* alright, but it eats out the lungs, and then infection sets in, in the lungs. You ought to know what killed

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your brother; you must have been told by the doctor why he died."

"I *was* told. You are right, as far as you go. But my brother lived a lot longer than usual for men who enter the swamp. He got home again."

"Does that mean anything?" Farar wasn't enthusiastic, but the reverse.

"He had with him a square package, among the other things he brought. I didn't know what it was until I projected his films. Did you notice anything about those little fellows?"

"Yes, I saw they had a peculiar pack on their backs. What about it?"

"That round device at the top of the back-pack pulls out on an extension, a hose. It is made to clamp over the mouth and nose, held in place by gripping with the teeth. I think that pack contains the secret of the method of living in the swamp. Those people are just like other humans, except for their webbed hands and wide webbed feet. And most native Venusian life has webbed extremities."

"So, suppose the pack does contain the secret. What about it?"

"I went farther. I had the contents analyzed. It contains a filtering medium with a dozen neutralizing chemicals in it—but none of the chemicals hard to obtain. I have had a half dozen larger duplicates of that pack made, and we can use them—to breathe through!"

"In the photo I didn't see anyone breathing through their pack. How do you know it isn't something else?"

"They were running away from something, and had thrown off the nose clamps to make faster progress. Evidently they can stand it for short periods, only use it when they are exposed to the air for long hours. That is what misled me at first."

"There's no way to prove your substitute pack is as efficacious as the original without risking our necks in the place, I suppose."

Hal turned quickly, facing the lean, leather-coated figure, sprawled negligently on his best Harn-leather chair. "Look, Farar, I don't expect to make a fortune off that platinum without a little risk. Sure we've got to take the chance. If you don't like it, get out! I think the work on the pack is adequate. Only I know what is in it. You've got to do it my way, and you've got to stick with me. You're needed only for handling the wild life which I understand is particularly venomous in there, and I'm no crack shot. I can do it alone, if Venus contains only cowards. But I'd rather go in there with a stout heart beside me, in a man like you—if you have one."

FARAR grinned. "I was hoping you'd show a little spunk. I don't aim to go into any such pesthole with a ninny, either."

Spontaneously, they shook hands. "Just the same, boss-man, we could test one of those packs from the edge of the swamp by putting it on a highland animal and tying him in there for a couple of days."

"And if you find him dead, how would you know exactly what killed him?"

"Cut him open, if it's his lungs congested—you know the pack's no good. If his lungs are okay, then it was something else that did it."

Hal nodded, glad to hear sensible suggestions coming from his newfound associate. He was going to have him checked, just to make sure he wasn't a well-known claim jumper or other undesirable, but from the quiet confident eye and able air, he struck Hal as an experienced hunter, a man who had grown up in conflict with the alien life—and stayed alive where oth-

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ers had fallen. Of the original colonists, this man was the first Hal had ever ran into who claimed direct descent from their number. Most of them had died without children, of one or another of the innumerable diseases and dangers of the alien environment.

"Look, Worran, another thing I noticed, the girl in that photo didn't have webbed hands! That means she is either of earth origin, or we don't know a darned thing about Venus."

"I wondered about that. But if you want the truth, I don't care if that hill isn't platinum—the girl looks like gold to me."

"She might know plenty about the swamp . . ." mused Farar.

"And she might have those little friends of hers put a dart in us, too."

"You plan to look it over with a heli—?"

"*I did.* You can't see a thing through the gigantic trees and the mist—gotta do it the hard way."

"I was gonna say . . ." murmured Farar.

VENUS contained, in this year of 2020, around ten thousand men and women of earth origin. They lived for the most part in plastic-shelled compounds around the mines of gold, platinum, radium, uranium and tungsten. Mostly they worked in the refineries or in the mines themselves, their living conditions were good but they were confined to the plastic shells of villages by the fertile and venomous natural life of the planet.

There were but two main ports where the earth ships landed and took off with the refined metals and those whose labor contracts were ended and who had had enough of Venus.

But on the fringes of this strictly mining population, confined by their shells in more ways than one, moved a few hundred intrepid souls who dared to brave the rigors of the jungles, mountains and all enveloping swamps. These prospected, hunted certain herbs and rare animals and insects—or just lived off the bounty of the natives; some of them were squawmen. A squawman was a particularly despised type on Venus. The Venusian natives were a good looking lot—at a distance. But when you got close, they exuded a strong bactrachian odor, and their greenish heavy skin was covered with odorous frog-like moisture. Their hands and feet were webbed, and their lungs were adapted to breathing water for long periods—when they so desired.

There were a few hybrids about, curiosities, as the union usually proved sterile.

They were intelligent and amiable in the same way a Great Dane dog is intelligent and amiable — but it doesn't mean anything. He can't or won't read the morning paper, and he isn't interested in discussing the next door neighbor's cheating on his wife with that blonde.

So the native Venusians were looked down upon and disregarded, which suited them very well. The venomous fauna kept the earthmen from spreading over hill and dale, kept their numbers reduced to a non-irritating minority—there were no "native wars." They had watched the first earth ships flame down from their cloud-filled sky with complete equanimity, for a time had shown a flattering interest in their everlasting bustle—and then had put them in the category of the unexplainable—and ignored them, quite as much as they were ignored.

There were very few men like this Frank Farar, who had been on Venus long enough to know anything about the place. Or about Grimalkins.

The Venusians lived in stilt houses,

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thatched huts erected on the top of tall pole platforms, and in the high forests of the two great mountain ranges, the Kolian and the Donan mountains—they lived in strongly built stone houses, to keep out the ground life.

Much of the wild life of the planet was reptilian. There were only two species with fur, and these were rats and a beaver-like animal. The heat was oppressive except in the mountain tops, and there it rained all the time. People remained on Venus only long enough to make a stake to get back to earth. But the mines paid the owners, who were for the most part non-resident, and men could always be obtained for high wages to make the trip.

WOMEN were at a premium, and a few enterprising men had shipped in several shiploads of young girls and established a colony. But the women languishing from an intense nostalgia, would not stay. It was not so much the alien ways; it was the lack of normal sunshine and green leaves, the gray fog, the everlasting rains, the gloomy lack of social life—they would not stay. The men had tried force, imprisoning them—but the miners had broken *that* up in a hurry. And on Venus you couldn't fight back against the miners; they were too hard to get.

So the Venusian colonies were a gloomy place of men and cards and whiskey and homesick melancholy, and little else but work.

Hal Worran had come with his father, a mining engineer, who had laid down his life before a giant spider of unknown category, on a desperate foray into the jungle to break the monotony. After his death, Hal had been allowed to live in his father's house, cared for by the older men—until the arrival of his older brother—a mining engineer just out of college. Instead of going to work in the mines, his brother had elected to take the longer shot at the riches of discovery of new and greater deposits of ore. It was this that had led to his death of the effects of the air of the great swamp called Despair on the earth maps. The Venusians called it Granlor, but that didn't matter. Nobody talked to the Venusians except a few like Farar.

Earth educators had talked idealistically of Venus when it was first reached by space ship—but after the first colony had died off, and the others had failed to grow, earth herself ignored Venus. It just wasn't wonderful.

But to Hal Worran, Venus *was* wonderful! Every tiny crawling serpentine bit of life, every strange leaf, every legend of the past that circulated among the natives, every terrific angle and aspect of the unknown that hovered always over the landscape for him—was wonderful, and exciting, and forbidden by dangers for which men had no answer.

Hal had studied his brother's books with his help, and had studied in the library of the mine superintendent's big house at the center of the plastic shell encircling the "Venusian Mining and Export, Inc.," compound. Once it had been called Fog Paradise by an over optimistic planning commission. Now, like the other settlements, it was called by the mining company's own name, and all pretense of establishing a normal city was abandoned.

Hal had some money, left him by his brother's insurance and his father's savings. It wouldn't last long, but it was enough to finance one trip of exploration. He was going to shoot the works—after that he would go to work.

These films brought by his dying brother were all he had to go on, coupled with his brother's scrawled diary

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of notes—they should be enough, he figured. If his brother thought that black hill was platinum ore—it was good enough for him.

FARAR advised a long native dugout, paddled by hand. Nothing goes wrong with a paddle; you don't have to carry fuel. Farar brought two expensive repeating rifles, a .45 and a .32 with telescopic sights. Anything weighing as much as a rifle cost a small fortune on Venus, because of the freight from earth—and Hal examined the guns with proper appreciation.

"We'll probably need elephant guns before we get out—but I've found that a small bullet, placed in the right spot, is worth a lot more than a heavy slug badly placed. I never could fire a really heavy gun rapidly. And we're not toting heavy target rifles. Besides, we won't carry a darn thing we don't have to have. For instance, sidearms. They feel nice and protective, but when you get up against a really savage beast, they're inaccurate except at such close range that the beast will reach you before he dies. We don't want to go lugging holster and pistol around anyway; unless you're a dead shot with a hand gun; but if the dugout tips, they'd sink us. Like shoes, those high-laced kind you've got. Swell for snakes but if you fall in the water, like a stone around your neck. A light, hard-leather puttee is safer, easier to get on and off."

"I'm learning fast," Hal said, enthusiastically discarding both shoes and heavy .45 revolver and cartridge belt.

"I've got a snake serum kit that will do for the known kinds. But the kind we'll run into in Despair are unknown, probably, and it won't help much. So don't get bitten! A paddle or club is better than a gun against a snake, anyway."

"You've got a mess of photographic equipment. I'd suggest leaving it. Dragging that stuff around maybe didn't kill your brother, but it helped. All we want is some of that nice black dirt, and some snapshots of the area it covers."

"Go in light and fast in the dugout, come out quick with the samples. Carry nothing we don't need absolutely. Right, Frank. You sound like sense.

"We've got to carry sleeping hammocks, sleeping nets to cover 'em. We'll probably have to sling 'em twenty feet from the ground and tie ourselves in, but we can rest as long as we keep our hammocks and nets. We can kill most of our food; there's plenty of it. So we don't tote a lot of grub. Just flour and grease, salt and etc. I'll show you how to live in a Venusian jungle. I've traveled from the Kolian peaks clear along the rims of the Sunon sea to Param, across the hills there to the big water, up along the beach to Venusport—and nothing but a rifle and a frying pan. Enjoyed it, too! Except for sleeping! I *never* get used to tying myself in the crotch of a tree. Makes me stiff . . ."

HAL laughed. He had the man he wanted, right enough. Probably not another man on the planet knew how to live in the forests and swamps that the native Venusians found so hospitable. Hal rubbed his hands together with excitement. Frank pointed at his hands—

"Another thing. *Don't get excited!* Not for *any* reason. In a pinch, *you only get excited once.* Just learn to hold that pulse down; it's easily learned; keep trying."

"Why do all these other guys who try such stunts turn up dead?"

"You mean they just don't turn up.

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Because they get excited, forget to watch every little thing. An insect no bigger than your finger can kill you—if it's the right insect. You've got to see everything, and not take a step till you do. That gets to be a habit, and a habit you change at your peril. They just didn't have the knack of looking at everything in front of them before they walked into it. I'll bet the spider that killed your dad could have been seen if he'd been looking for it. *But he wasn't looking!*"

"You know what worries me most, Frank?"

"Whether that gal will speak to you, I suppose. Or turn up her nose. Girls are scarce enough on Venus to make a guy go into Despair, hah!"

"No, not that. If those little guys with her are what you think they are, the original dominants of Venus, the boys that built the ruins that are so darn un-understandable—*they know plenty we don't!* They're liable to turn loose on us with something we can't handle . . ."

"They don't worry me. Not if they have the same character the big natives do." No use telling Hal what he really knew. Only worry him.

"It's not their character. But what wiped 'em out? What are they running from in the photograph? Is the old original threat that killed them off still waiting around to pounce on us when we show . . ."

"You know what worries me the most, thinking ahead?"

"Whether I'm wrong about what an outcrop of Polyxene ore looks like?"

"No, money doesn't mean so much to me as you'd think. I ain't crazy to get to earth; I've never been there. What worries me is a plain ordinary little wren."

"A wren!"

"Yeah, a wren! When I get near one, she lets go with a rattle, and I think it's a big rattlesnake. Then I can't see the rattlesnake. Then I get excited because I can't find the snake—and the wren flies up in my face, and my hands shake. Those little birds worry me . . ."

"I didn't know they had wrens and rattlesnakes on Venus."

"Well, I wouldn't know even whether they *are* wrens and rattlesnakes. I only learned what they were looking them up in books from earth. They're the same thing but different colored. For instance the Venusian rattlesnake has his rattles all along his side, like sleigh bells along a harness. And I never saw a sleigh, or snow. The wren has a big red crest she shoots up when she flies in your face. But as near as I could learn they're pretty near the same . . ."

"Just the same, only different. Like everything else here, translated through a million years of variant environment, the similar life forms are far from similar."

"I'd probably get knocked off in a Terran forest by something you wouldn't even worry about. Like the tigers I've read about. I never saw one. I'd think it was an overgrown house cat, or something."

"I never saw one either, Frank. I came here when I was fourteen."

"Heck, you're an old settler! Aren't many stayed here more than three years."

THE men were interrupted in their preparations by a knock on the door. Hal opened the door upon a stooped grey figure.

"Another old settler, Hal," said Farar over his shoulder. "The doc has been around pretty near as long as I have. He gave me castor oil when I was a kid."

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"Doctor Allan," cried Hal. "I'm glad to see you! Come in, come in!"

The old man came in, moving his limbs painfully. Sometime he had acquired what was called Venusian paralysis, due to the inroads of a parasite which made its home in the nerves. He moved by jerks but fairly rapidly. He sat down, putting his hands together on the head of his cane and looking at each of them carefully, his head jerking back and forth.

"Something on your mind, doctor?" asked Hal. He admired the old man, who had remained here, he knew, only to learn from the opportunities the alien life presented—and not from any preference for the climate.

"I came to forbid you this trip," Doctor Allan mumbled, his speech had been affected. Hal was used to his infirmities. "But seeing this tall jungle ape here with you, I withdraw my protests. If he goes along you have a chance. I never heard of any human coming out of that swamp alive but your brother. And he died."

Hal showed the old man his breathing-pack, explained why they had a chance to stay alive.

"Only thing is, how long does this neutralizing effect last—how strong is that harmful acid in the air? You don't know. I'd take a dozen refills for the pack, so that when the contents are exhausted, you can replace the chemicals."

Farar groaned. "We're traveling light, doc."

"I said *take it along!* Your canoe will carry you—*and the packs*. If you lose either one, you won't get back anyway."

"I have them made up; if you want the formula for your files, doc, I'll give it to you on condition that you don't divulge it till I am given up for lost."

"S'another thing. About that pack, who made it up for you? Does the party know what you are going in for, and where you are going?"

"No. I told them nothing specific about my plans. They don't know what the chemicals are intended for."

"If they knew where you're heading, and why—they might give you phony packs and then jump your claims after you're dead. But they don't. I don't trust anybody any more, not where a fortune is concerned."

"How'd you know I was after a fortune?"

"Why else would you get ready to enter Despair?"

"Show the doc your films, Worran. You can trust him, if you can trust anyone."

The old doc sat and jerked his limbs through the little show. When it was over, he said: "I'd give my right arm, aye, and a leg, to go along and see that place. Bring me some specimens, too, for my collection, Hal."

THE old man collected every freakish example of Venusian life, his house was a veritable museum of zoölogy Venusian. He was an authority on the subject, the only one of any importance who had spent an adult lifetime on the planet.

He got painfully to his feet, shaking his head in affected sorrow over their imminent demise. "I'll send flowers, orchids!"

Hal *was* glad the old man had come. It served to recommend the character of the tall Frank Farar, whom he had not known previously. If Doc Allen did not warn him against him, he was okay for his book.

"Orchids for brave men, worse luck. It's a *sheol* of a planet, boys, be careful—and bring back specimens in nice dry moss—I don't want any mouldy messes like some bring."

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The old man jerked his unwieldy limbs away out the door and across the dark, sterile soil of the compound. Hal looked up at the gray plastic, over which the rain was pouring outside. Gray, mournful clouds pressing down, the falling rain, an occasional wide-winged scarlet bird crashing against the transparent obstacle overhead. He shut the door.

Farar raised the glass he had just filled.

"To the defeat of Dèspair!"

CHAPTER II

FOR weeks they had paddled up the wide *River of Doubt*. The natives called it the Granlee, which had some connection with its source in the swamplands they called the Granlor. The earthmen had renamed it the "River of Doubt," because anyone who went up it might entertain grave doubts of coming back down again.

Wide as the Amazon of earth, the Granlee was sluggish, titanic in strength, tremendous in flood-time twice a year, just now shrunk to half its flood size. Occasionally gigantic tree trunks drifted down past their dugout, a slender trunk of young cypress hollowed out by the natives with fire and stone axe. It was nicely balanced, and Farar had attached his own concept of an outrigger, with improvements enabling quick dismantling for passage through narrow places. Their baggage was reduced to the irreducible minimum; one hundred-pound packs, their rifles and ammunition. Each carried a machete from earth slung to their belt—and that was all.

Day after day the grey-green dripping walls of the jungle slid past, and night after night they moored the dugout, sleeping in the bottom with the dugout drifting at the end of a hundred feet of line. Farar always chose a place where they could moor and the current would keep them swinging in a short arc, rather than sweep them ashore. He apparently preferred the dangers of the swimming denizens to the attacks of those which prowled the shore.

"Taint natural for the big fellows in the water to attack a boat. Never heard of it. They can't smell you—especially earth people; we don't have a smell they can place. But on shore, a guy snores—they hear him, and come from all directions, crawling, flying, or just oozing—to see what's up."

Hal liked sleeping in the boat better himself. They could see what waited and followed them along the banks, the great carnivorous grey-striped red land eels with strong bodies twenty feet long, and powerful walking legs, who had evolved far beyond the amphibious stage of the earth eel; the tall-necked saurian called Felars, after the Venusian name, who could run like a deer and strike like a two-ton snake, with a head all fangs and fierce eyes. The first men had called them snake-giraffes, but the name had not stuck.

THERE were other wonders, which Farar took as natural and everyday things, trees that bent slowly over toward them and showered them with bright little seeds from bursting pods, seeds that stuck like glue, shooting little tendrils into the very flesh, beginning to take root at once. They had to be torn off at once or they would grow into the body and kill a person.

"Lotta animals die from that," Farar would say, picking out the tiny tenacious rootlets. "S" the way the tree spreads. Animal gets it in 'im, runs till he drops, dies and fertilizes the ground for the seed to grow in. You run into them everywhere. It's a bad

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one; watch it."

Hal watched it, as well as everything else, intently, carefully, his eyes darting, darting, getting the habit Frank had told him he must acquire or die. "Never miss a thing, 'cause that's the one thing that's going to kill you. 'J'ever notice the nervous eyes on the Venusians. Always moving, moving, looking at every single object around them till they know what it is and if it can hurt them. Your eyes *have* to do that, here. So start looking, and keep it up."

"First thing I noticed about you, Frank. The way your eyes took in everything, moving, moving. First I thought you were a crook. Then I remembered I'd heard other old timers speak of Venusian eyes."

"There are no sloths in Venusian trees. They couldn't live here like they do in earth forests."

Day followed day, paddle and sweat and curse the rain and the heat, and watch the water for the big swirl that meant a bad saurian of a size sufficient

They paddled on through the treacherous Venusian swamps, day after

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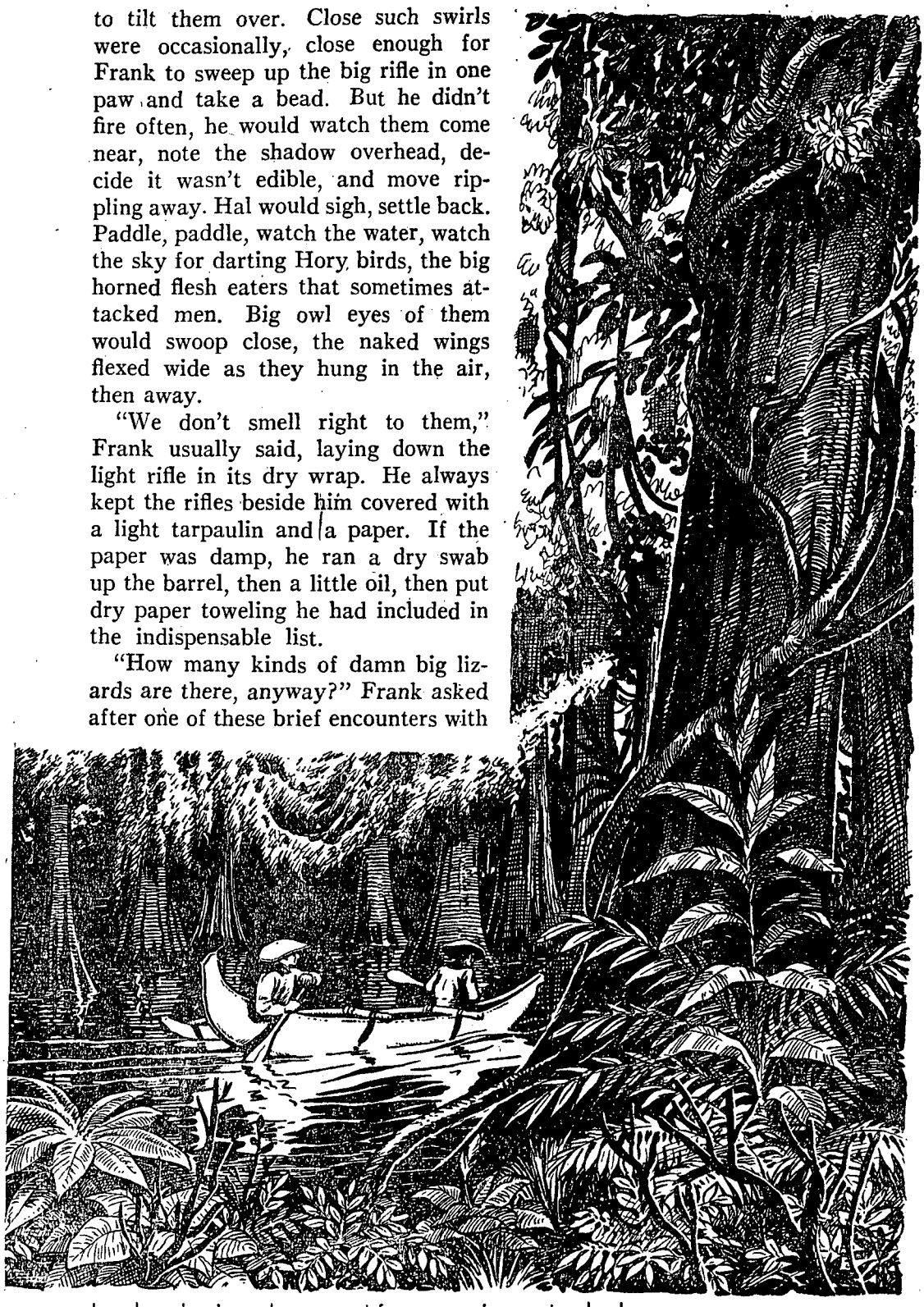
to tilt them over. Close such swirls were occasionally, close enough for Frank to sweep up the big rifle in one paw and take a bead. But he didn't fire often, he would watch them come near, note the shadow overhead, decide it wasn't edible, and move rippling away. Hal would sigh, settle back. Paddle, paddle, watch the water, watch the sky for darting Hory birds, the big horned flesh eaters that sometimes attacked men. Big owl eyes of them would swoop close, the naked wings flexed wide as they hung in the air, then away.

"We don't smell right to them," Frank usually said, laying down the light rifle in its dry wrap. He always kept the rifles beside him covered with a light tarpaulin and a paper. If the paper was damp, he ran a dry swab up the barrel, then a little oil, then put dry paper toweling he had included in the indispensable list.

"How many kinds of damn big lizards are there, anyway?" Frank asked after one of these brief encounters with



day, always keeping a sharp eye out for some saurian monster ahead . . .

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the swirl of water that had shown a great square muzzle with chisel teeth, then turned away, flipping a thirty foot tail scornfully.

"Nobody knows, Worran. I've read about earth explorers discovering new kinds of snakes on earth! What would they discover here? Nobody knows."

"Sure is a snake paradise. Something about this river gets me, Frank. Something I think about the next bend, what's going to be ahead . . . I like this river. River of Doubt, eh?"

"Yeh, but Doubt that means the unknown. Those guys named it, they didn't love it. I love the rivers of Venus. Nobody knows what you're going to find when you start up a river here. They're all Rivers of Doubt."

"Are we crazy, Frank? Starting off after a half-naked wild girl, a platinum hill, and a lot of Brownies? Are we?"

"Not us, boy! It's the fellows digging down in those wet mines, breathing rock dust and getting miner's colic, that are crazy. Digging somebody else's fortune out of the rocks. At least we're after our own, Hal!"

"Yeh, they take as big risks every day. You're right. I'm glad I got hold of you, instead of some greenhorn."

"That's what the Doc said when he left me. "Take care of that boy, he's a good one." You've friends, Hal."

"He taught me what little I know. Some men make you feel like living had some sense to it. Men like old Doc, eh? He'd never let a pal down, always on the job to fix 'em up when they're hurt; a life-time he's spent, being good to people! And if he loves 'em, why *men are* some *good,* Frank."

"Sure they are! But quit talking, it distracts me. And a man can't be distracted when he's going into Despair. I never been here before, myself, you know."

"Uhh!" said Hal, starting his eyes on that dancing movement Frank had insisted on.

THE river was widening, slowing, changing from clear green to a muddy grey green. Here and there streaks of darker water filled Hal with excited anticipation, thinking he was right about what made the water black in the swamp around that hill. Was it . . . . or was he crazy, thinking the water had enough acid to pick up the black oxide in solution?

Ahead the forest seemed to reach even higher, up and up into the lowering clouds, great boles marching across the place where the river should be. Straight into the water under these trees Frank headed the dugout, and quite suddenly there was no river, only quiet endless aisles of silence and poisonous beauty—the gloom and the awe and the deadly danger of the Swamp of Despair!

"They didn't know this swamp when they called it Despair, did they?" Hal was moved by the beauty, the weird exotic sensual fecundity of ferns and air plants and hanging orchids, the trailing grey beards of moss from the gigantic limbs of the cypress.

"See that greenish mist ahead? That's the poisonous mist that kills men in here. The plants don't mind it, and the snakes don't breathe enough for it to hurt 'em, I guess. But notice the silence! When a Venusian jungle goes as quiet as this one—look out!"

Hal got out his packs, gave one to Farar, strapped one on his back. "We going to test one like you suggested?"

"As guide I think we should. It would be too late to do anything if we went ahead and they didn't work. But we have to catch an animal, and for that we've got to go back and look for dry land."

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They caught a small hairless deer alive by creasing him, which astounded Hal with the accuracy of fire of Farar. They attached the pack, one of the spares the old Doctor had ordered. They slung the small, smooth-skinned, reptilian-appearing animal in the crotch of a forest giant some distance within the borders of the billowing green mist, and paddled swiftly out again to await results.

Night was near, the long drawn twilight of Venus was fading, when they picked a spot for their base of operations, making a start on a tree-platform between a close growing group of trees on an island. Slinging their hammocks just above the rough platform of poles they turned in just as the darkness became complete.

The silence itself was disturbing, the usual serenade of night birds, shrill insects, giant tree-toads—the hooting of the water reptiles, the moaning mating calls of unknown lizards—the scream of battling Hory birds—was all absent, and the absence gave them a strong sense of foreboding, of ominous hovering threat. Something deadly caused this silence, and this far from the borders of the poison mists—there *should* be the always present racket of the jungle night.

Hal dropped off to sleep at last, vainly listening for something, something . . .

HE AWOKE suddenly, overturning the hammock and sprawling on the lashed poles they had placed beneath for just that occurrence. It was the first time they had made a permanent camp, and Hal had expected a good night's sleep without the necessary lashings.

He lay for a minute getting his bearings, then stood up, trying vainly to learn what had wakened him. Farar rumbled from his hammock:

"So you heard it at last. Wondered when it would wake you up."

"I don't know what woke me!"

"Listen, you'll find out!"

Then it came to him, that distant hum and beat as of massive wings—wings of tremendous size—beating the air! Or was it something else, some throbbing giant throat, pulling air in and out in vast gusts?

Then came the roar! The very water quivered and retreated from the sound, the trees bent from it, the ear drums refused to bear it, the mind refused to consider it!

"What in the name of God!"

"I'm thinking that's the reason this swamp is feared more than any other place. That is a leviathan, something new to me." Farar still hesitated to tell Hal *he came for this* . . .

"Is that his wings, or his breathing . . ."

"Sounds like it's wings and breathing, and that thing is miles away, Hal. It must be a mile long, to make noises like that."

"It sure ain't a mosquito," murmured Hal.

"If I was in this for the money, I'd quit right now." Farar grinned in the dark at his lie.

"If I didn't want to at least see it, I'd quit with you."

"There ain't no such animal." Hal stood there, listening to the dying sounds of the giant afar off, until he heard Farar gently snoring. Then he gave up and crawled back in his hammock. The grey dawn and the odor of frying meat woke him. Farar was up first again. He had brought up wet earth and made a firepit on the platform. He had made the damp wood burn with his magic, and was cooking an oteli, a squirrel-like animal the size of a dog.

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"Did I dream it?" asked Hal, from his hammock.

"I wish it *was* a dream. But I'm afraid the thing exists. It may not be as bad as it sounds. Some of those giants are vegetarians."

"Not the kind with wings. And you said it was *new* to you—now you say *some of those giants,* as if you had run into something like it before."

"Heard the natives talk about the big ones. I thought they were legends, but it seems they keep legends alive, here. The Brownies are supposed to be a legend, too." Funny how a man hates to reveal his inner works even to a friend, mused Farar.

"Going ahead, anyway?" Hal's eyes were bright on Farar's.

"Might's well. Wotta we got to lose?"

THEY took the deer down. A Hory bird had got to him, but hadn't killed him. He was badly torn. Worran put a bullet in his head, and began to cut the carcass open. He wanted to see those lungs. The animal had lived, the mask had not been torn off his nose, and he wanted to see those lungs.

The green mist billowed denser. Somewhere above, the clouds let a shaft of terrific sunlight through, and the mist glowed like emerald dust all about them. The red, bloody cavity of the hairless deer was vivid; their eyes smarted from the mist, hurt from the sudden sun. The sun went out as suddenly, and Hal stood up, the lungs a dripping clot in his hands. Carefully he parted the inner tissues with his knife edge, gave a sigh of relief. "Clean as a baby's," he handed them to Frank. Frank tossed them in the water, watched the sudden boil as a dozen pointed black snake heads shot toward the meat, thrashed savagely over it. Thick as a man's arms, they had teeth to make a six inch hole in a man.

"The weemies are sure thick in here," he mused, watching the water from the broad rooted base of the tree they stood upon. "I wouldn't know if the lungs were damaged or not, Hal."

"I used to study Doc's medical library, and he told me a lot, showed me a lot. The lungs *are* unhurt."

"I'll take your word for it. Now let's take a look at your brother's sketch maps. We might as well make the deep jump now, before the rain starts. Looks like a spell of mild weather . . ."

Hal put up his knife, got in the canoe. They shoved off, paddles dipping rhythmically. The dull green-black water rippled past, the gigantic trees remarked majestically upon the puniness of man, the grey moss waggled dignifiedly, and the great white horn-snakes raised their heads from the skull-like cypress knees where they waited. The purple and gold of the water monsters flashed ahead where they leaped, but as the dugout neared, they dived out of sight. Above the water, in the slow drifting mist currents, nothing moved but the swaying black leaves of the nodding lilies, the sinuous glide of a snake along a limb, the soft drip of condensation—acid-water of the mist, dripping *—and no other sounds!*

After an hour of this, Farar stopped paddling, opened his pack, took out a round gadget, fitted it on his rifle. He grinned apologetically at Hal.

"Felt kinda guilty about this. It's poacher's equipment. But we don't want to have that thing that made the noise last night hearing us. It's the latest design in silencers."

"Didn't know they *had* poachers on Venus!"

"When they first came, they passed a lot of laws to protect the wild life. Now they know better, they ought to pass laws to protect earth people from

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the wild life. But the laws are still on the books, and the wardens still draw pay, and pinch a poacher once in a while. Most of the valuable bird skins are on the illegal lists. Fella has to make a living."

Abruptly the gliding dugout swung, as Frank spotted a landmark, a giant dead cypress, long succumbed to borers, now a tall skeleton of dead white against the grey-green wall. The map had mentioned it. It looked like a cross.

"Should be getting there soon. Look alive for a change."

Hal came out of the dream engendered by gliding water and silence, gripped the mouthpiece of his breathing tube hard, tried to miss nothing that moved.

They couldn't have missed it if they had tried. It was much bigger than the photos had seemed, dominated the whole tree-columned horizon ahead, its broad black top disappearing in the green mists. "Hill! It's a mountain!" Hal cried.

"Smart piece of pocket money if it's what your brother thought. Would a saved us a lot of work if he'd brought samples."

"He was dying, you know that!"

FRANK headed the dug-out straight across the open water toward the black sides of the mountain. It took a long time. It was a mountain, distances were deceptive. For some reason nothing grew on that black soil, hard, impervious, almost rock it seemed.

As the dug-out bumped against the sheer slope of the black loom, Hal darted his head toward a near splash. Had he seen what he thought he saw? Was that a "brownie"? Or were his eyes playing a trick on him?

"Thought I saw one of the little fellows dive in the water."

"If you do see one of those little men, don't shoot unless you know he means trouble."

"I wouldn't shoot 'em."

Hal was already busy breaking out a small prospector's test kit, shaking a sample of the spongy, hard soil in a bottle with aqua regia. Adding sal ammoniac he got a slight yellow stain, which could be mud or PtC16, what he was looking for. It didn't tell him anything, but it was encouraging. Farar watched him with a slightly condescending eye, then bent and with his forefinger loosened a bit of grey-white granulation from the dark earth.

"If this is what you're looking for, you can stop that. From what I've heard, the oxides of this stuff need only heat to drive off the oxygen anyway. Where'd you learn chemistry?"

Hal grinned. "I didn't. I looked up the tests in the encyclopedia."

"Well, you got it all right except you have to heat the acid and the ore together for days to get it all dissolved. But good ore always contains little granules of the straight stuff, and platinum always occurs with iridium, osmium, and a couple of other brothers of the same family. And here's the granules."

"In my brother's notes he says he never heard of platinic oxide occurring in nature."

"He had an idea it was platinum, and I think he was right. The black color doesn't *have* to mean anything, he just *thought* it was the oxide. Polyxene is what they call platinum ore, and if it's black here, there are lots of substances that could make it black."

"We'll stake out our claims, fill a bag with samples from several spots on the hill, and get out. I don't feel like sleeping in here, I'll tell you. Too much gargantua . . ."

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"We're probably the two ignorantest prospectors ever staked a claim."

"So what do they have an assay office for?"

She hadn't made a sound. She stood just behind them, still dripping. It was the drip that made Frank whirl and level the rifle.

Then he snorted. She stood quite still and unafraid, looking at him curiously. She held up her hands and looked at them. Then she pointed at Hal's hands, lax with incredulous surprise at his side.

"Osky mar," she laughed, her voice was all girl; a rich, natural, wild-flavored music.

The two men exchanged glances in which amusement struggled with caution, and a certain natural masculine comment on her appearance was expressed by a low whistle from Frank.

"Wheeoooweee! Some babe!"

"Her photograph didn't do her half justice."

"Justice? They were an insult!"

"Osky mar yourself," remarked Hal, grinning at her wide smile.

She held up her fingers, running her fingertip over the finger webs, pointing out that there *were no webs.*

"She means she has hands like us. That *osky mar* business sounds like some words I know. *'Ousky mour'* among my native friends means—'same people.' It's something like 'Hello, clansman,' in literal translation." Frank was studying her. She certainly looked like an earth girl to him. There were no alien signs he could see.

"Can you speak English," asked Frank, taking a chance. An expression of complete surprise came on her face, the smile became a wide O of astonishment.

"Engliss! You spik engliss! Papa!" It was the men's turn to be surprised. Again they exchanged astonished glances. Frank mused aloud:

"She must have been brought here when young. God knows *how* she got here. I don't get it, but here she is. Now *where* are the Brownies?"

"You're papa to her, Frank." Hal was laughing in spite of himself. "*Papa,* she says. Hah, hah!"

"Don't laugh yet, Worran. We don't know what she's here for. Wait till she lets us know what for . . ."

"She's not carrying a breathing pack. She hasn't come far, and she's going right back. Now where in H . . . did she come from that we didn't hear her?"

"She came up out of the water. I figured those gnomes lived under water. Now I know it! I'll bet this hill is hollow, and we're standing on her front stoop."

"An underwater entrance, like a beaver-house! Say! They're not going to like it when we start digging the ore off their roof!"

"That's what I was just thinking. We'd better be nice, or they'll tell us to leave."

The girl frowned at that. "Leave? No, no!"

Frank squatted on his heels, the rifle in front of him vertically. He said—"Stay? Yes, yes!"

"Papa!" She grinned, and let out a bird trill of laughter, sweet as a ripple in a brook, high and clear and carrying. Almost instantly the water swirled near the shore, a bald head popped to the surface, and a little web-pedaled man clambered ashore, stood dripping beside the girl.

"Snow-white calling her dwarves," murmured Frank.

"I hope *he* isn't her papa."

"I'm her *'papa!'* She said so." Frank was grinning, but he had lowered the rifle muzzle till it stared directly at the amphibian.

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The two men climbed from their canoe and onto the bank, their eyes on the girl before them

ANOTHER and another of the peculiar pop-eyed little men shot to the surface, clambered ashore. Their eyes were tremendous, and they darted about with the motion called "Venusian eyes," Hal noted. He tried to see everything himself. Their ears were not at all human, being very large, pointed on top, with wide flaring lobes. They were all three bald as eggs.

"Your Brownies are a little greenish to me," remarked Hal.

"Now don't interrupt, I'm trying to establish communication." Frank was staring intently at the girl, trying to impress her with his essential benevolence, from the look of it.

"You *talk* to me, girl. Do you live here?" Frank spoke very slowly and distinctly.

Hal suddenly jumped, one of the little men had opened his mouth, unrolled an eight inch tongue with a fork in the end, and rolled it up again. He had a right to be startled.

"Venusian mammals all show traces of reptilian origin," murmured Frank, smiling at Hal. "I heard a Professor say so."

The girl had put her finger in her

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mouth, stood sucking on it like a child. "Yes, live here." She seemed to be reaching back in her mind for something long forgotten. That once she had been an English speaking colonist was obvious.

"You live in hill?"

"Inside my home is. You visit me, nice?"

"I visit you, nice, yes. But what about your little friends?"

"Lil frens? Like me, like you, they!"

"Well, what are we waiting for?" asked Hal. "She invited us in, if I know anything."

"Sure. But you don't know anything, and neither do I. They might be cannibals, or poisonous, or crazy."

"Or drunk, or supernatural, or mean, or old ladies like you. You're too cautious, man!"

"I'm alive," murmured Frank.

"I'm alive," echoed the girl.

"And that's evidence enough they mean well."

"It ought to be. But remember that racket we heard last night? That thing's alive, too."

Inside Frank's head the incredible pieces of the tremendous puzzle he had been trailing for a long, long time were falling into place now with a bewildering significance which he had been told would happen but which he had not truly believed. If these gnome-like people *were* the *Bunaes* (which was the origin of the earthmen's appellation for the supposedly extinct race), *then all was not good.*

The natives had assured him they were not extinct. He stood there trying to touch their minds with *yarva,* but they withheld thought-talk from him. That was a danger-sign, too!

His native friends had assured him of the truth of an unbelievable tale about the Bunaes, that they still lived hidden away, and would come again to devastate the planet as of old. That they were not people, but the arms and legs and eyes of a monster that used them as servants and allies—on which they were dependent—even parasitic. They were the distantly controlled parts of a terrible symbiosis anciently inherited, serving a tremendous creature of awful nature, hating all other men.

HE HAD thought it a wild tale until the *yarva* had sent him to Hal to see the photos for himself. These then were the servants of the Grimalkin he had come to see, the hunter's instinct driving him unerringly to the lair.

Other seemingly impossible things he had *yarva*'d of this planet had proved true unerringly.

All his instincts were screaming caution to him, he was hot on the scent of the mighty quarry — but was he equipped to meet it?

If a native Venusian had seen a Bunae he would have fled until his legs could carry him no longer—and they were not afraid of the terrible wild-life of the planet, could meet it gamely, even when it meant death.

The yarva sense he had developed from his "greenie" teachings warned him of a hidden threat in their stares. A deep cold apprehension grew and grew in him, and would not die. This thing was true!

The acid water of this swamp was the preferred habitat and hiding place of the vast monster he had heard, been told of, and now faced in the person of the little people who served him. He had heard it roaring in the night, why did he disbelieve what his logic told him must be true. The fact of the girl's presence was the part that did not fit—or did it?

ONE of the little men now decided that he wanted to know things.

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He stepped up to Frank and tapped his breathing pack. He chattered at the girl—"Osky mar papa paknari sepeeri."

She nodded and smiled. She said—"Paknari sepeeri, too. Yes! Frens like us," she went on, and Hal got it. They were noticing his packs copied from their own.

But Frank had been noticing things too. The third little man was pointing a funny little tube at him, and he didn't like it. "Tell your other papa to put down that sleep producer he's got on us," he growled at the girl, pointing at the object.

She turned and saw the weapon. She screamed—"Lakmari awfu dood, boxi mak!"

"Thanks," murmured Frank. "She's handy as an interpreter. But I don't like the idea of going into that hole of theirs without knowing more about it. Let's just quietly shove off, and come back tomorrow after a little thought on the subject."

"I'm not crazy about it either. But I hate like hell to go off and leave her here. Seems like a crime."

"We're not gonna leave her here. That's why we gotta do things just right. So they'll let us take her."

"They never will. We'll have to steal her."

"She complicates things considerably," said Frank, getting up and stretching his knees. Slowly, keeping his gun ready but not threatening, he walked down to the dugout, got in. Hal started to follow. He was in for a surprise. The girl flung her arms around his neck, screamed:

"No, papas, no. Grimalkin kill! No. No!"

"Did she say kill? Grimalkin kill! You know what a Grimalkin is, Hal?"

Hal was blushing furiously. He had not been near a young woman for years, not since he was sixteen. The last young woman in the Venusian Mining and Export compound had died then. There were women on Venus, but he didn't know them. Only the superintendent's wife, and she was forty.

"No, what's a Grimalkin?" asked Hal, his hands faltering between unclasping the girl's grasp or returning her embrace.

"Don't get excited, or you're a goner!" Frank was watching Hal and the wild girl with quiet enjoyment of his embarrassment. "Well, a Grimalkin is a thing that there ain't any of, like St. George's dragon on earth. It's an old legend among the natives. I think it's what we heard last night."

"Just a dragon, that's all. Nobody ever saw one."

Hal had unfastened the girl's hands, got into the dugout. He was going to let the Grimalkin kill him, Frank guessed. Frank stroked the boat backward, swung away.

"I wonder if I'm doing the right thing? The way that thing was sounding off last night, we might prefer to be under that mountain of ore instead of on top, at that."

Hal wiped the sweat off his face. It was raining gently. He put his nose mask on, and took up the paddle. Silently they stroked back to the island and their cache in the trees. Frank shot a *poochie* and cooked it. A *poochie* is a feathered serpent, Worran learned. . . . Only it barks like a dog! But it was good meat.

They sat looking at each other, waiting for time to turn in. The light died away, it was night. But this twilight was different. It was filled with their own fear of that awful beast they had heard. Waiting for it to start. *Waiting.* The dark was ominous, and they knew now it *was* dangerous. The girl had made that plain.

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THE terrible thrash of wings came, loud, and in the silence, fearful. The snort of vast breathing, the lusty splashing, the heavings and then the hum and beat of flight. As the beat died away, Frank turned in his hammock. He lit a match, which he never did except when absolutely necessary. And he held the light in Hal's face for long moments, till it burned his fingers. Hal didn't get it.

"What's *that* for?"

"Tomorrow we're going dragon hunting, St. George."

About three seconds later he was snoring. Hal lay there wondering. Some things were hard to figure. This hunter hadn't said he was going after that terrible beast of the swamp, or had he? He *had* said it! He *didn't* say it till he looked into Hal's face. He must have seen there enough courage to warrant the expedition. Or was it that? Was he just curious as to the effect on him of the terrific implications in the noises that beast made? Nest, dragon's nest near here . . . Hal fell asleep.

Of such stuff are dragon slayers made.

They slept soundly all night!

CHAPTER III

FRANK seemed to know where they were going. Hal knew he had taken a fix on that sound with his sense of direction, and was heading straight for it.

"How come you wanta kill that thing?" asked Hal.

"Dunno, for sure. Just can't help it, I guess. That's why I looked at you last night. To see if you wanted to, too. And you did!"

"You're telepathic, or psychic, or something."

They paddled on, through terrific columns, a temple of Despair lovely with the curious dim green light bringing out the natural awe of the might of nature's work.

The water rippled silently, venomously alive with water serpents, following the dugout. Waiting, Hal knew. He could feel their hunger, waiting.

Now and then the big V of a larger snake shot toward them, veered as it neared, and Frank caught up his rifle. Hal had picked up the knack of swinging in his paddle and scooping up the gun all in one motion, bringing it to sight, ready for fire. But Frank had said: "Don't you fire unless I yell. This silencer of mine will keep Mr. Grimalkin from knowing we're around. I've only got one along, so just don't."

Frank plugged two of them, and they thrashed purple and gold coils all around the dugout, rocking it dangerously. Hal held his breath while the red froth and green slime squirmed and boiled with the hungry snakes tearing their wounded kin apart. Big ones could attack the boat. They had to be shot before they got that close.

This scene had been repeated several times a day for Hal, but it never lost its thrill. He hated not having a chance to shoot too, today. But he had learned to obey the hunter in the bow. Hal wondered why he had changed from his usual place in the stern. But he hadn't asked. He figured he wanted to look for sign of the monster.

Ahead there loomed a vast tangle, the gigantic trunks of trees canted at crazy angles, making a giant brush heap. Frank backed water, began to circle the place slowly. Hal didn't say anything. He knew now *when* not to talk.

Closer and closer, the paddles hardly dripping, Hal mimicking Frank's stroke, not raising the paddle, but twisting it and sliding it ahead for the

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back stroke. Noiseless as a shadow they slid closer to . . . the nest!

They could hear the deep soughing breath now! Minutes apart, they seemed! Between the wrecked branches they slid the canoe, and Frank took the rope and wrapped it once around a limb, not knotting it but making a slipknot. Hal pictured themselves trying to run from that . . . It didn't make sense! Frank picked up the heavy rifle with the silencer. Hal picked up the lighter gun. They slid up the canted trunk of the tree like two serpents. Slow, slow, not even scraping their feet. A twig cracked under Hal's hand. They froze, didn't move for minutes. The vast rhythm of breathing did not change. They went on. Higher and higher . . . and *they could see!*

IT *LAY in a hollow of trampled muck and limbs like a locomotive dropped there from above.* Frank amended that. Like a freight train, with caboose attached!

Its vast head lay like a Gorgon's, the sorrows of horror in the deep lines of pain around the great closed eyes and the jaws that dwarfed a whale's by three. Two round throbbing spots marked the ears. It was earless.

The wings were folded along the terrible leviathan back like two collapsed circus tents. Circus tents made of mottled, hideous leather, scarred and horrible with past battles.

The incredible pieces of a vast enigma clicked into place now in Frank's memory, his deductive mind created the whole history of this terrific monster out of a bloody planet's terrible past. Only one piece remained—were the Brownies, the Bunae—*really* servants of this thing?

Why else was their home but a short distance from the ancient nest of a killer incarnate—a killer such as no earthman ever saw before? If they were attached to this thing by any bond but fear, why was the earthgirl living with them in apparent security? Still an enigma, but Frank was afraid. Afraid that they were up against some ancient mystical terror, some peculiar and inhuman thing that could not be understood, and would kill them before they did.

But the hunter in him brushed aside the futile speculation as to what connection there was between the Bunae and this creature, thrilled at the size of the quarry, thrilled—and decided what he had not before decided—whether to try to match his skill against the monster he had but heard—or to get out and leave the mountain of rich ore to the swamp and its terrible guardian. *Now he knew what he had to do, to risk.*

That horrible body stretched vast sinews—on and on; Hal turned his eyes away, sickened to his soul's depth. The gargantuan haunches ending in great bird-grasping claws, big enough to pick up a three-story house . . .

The tiny forepaws lay along each side of the terrible jaws, but they weren't paws, they were hands, neither webbed nor clawed, just terrible, sentient, knowing *hands.*

IT WAS like a Cerberus, guarding the gates of Hell, terrible and knowing and waiting. *It* was like chaos before life, the time-aura that hung stinking about *it.* This thing had winged across worlds before man crawled from the sea, one would think. *It* was like a Harpy, sleeping and dreaming of blood and the shedding of blood and the drinking. *It* was like the sea bottom, aged and ageless, barnacled and hoary and littered with bones about *it. It* was terror incarnate, and *Farar was drawing a bead on the head of it!*

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Hal's heart dropped into his boots and bounced into his throat. No, *this wasn't sense!* No bullet made by man could even sting this thing awake, let alone *kill* it! He had not realized *Farar was mad!* Mad, madness to even be looking at this ancient leftover from time's worst period of hate!

From the scalp, long tentacle—like bristles—moved slowly as the scalp muscles writhed beneath. It opened those three vast eyes, one in its forehead, two wide-placed beneath, and stared at them. Stared sleepily, unnoticing—or not? Stared, and visibly thought—*yarva* smart with the ages of mind-reading in its memory!

Frank fired. Hal heard the venomous little unmistakable hiss of the silencer. The monster jerked his head as if a fly had bit him. A tiny fleck of blood appeared in the vast eyeball, spread quickly, one great eye was as if bloodshot suddenly, little veinings of running blood spreading outward from the center. The silencer hissed again! The monster roared, now! The wide circus tents began to unfold, fold on terrible fold, the haunches bunched, the vast claws spread and buckled with the weight, taking the strain of his lashing endless tail. Up and over that tail, like a titanic scorpion's, down and crash! It must *yarva* this enemy, *it could not see it!*

Frank's rifle hissed again. Hal brought the 32 Special up, thinking he might as well be crazy too, but Frank knocked it down, gripping his arm with fingers that sank in to the bone. His eyes were bright as a demon's on Hal's, the fire of terrific strain and pride running in his glance like lightning. *His words were as light and hissing as the silencer's hiss.*

"Don't move!"

They stood there, and those vast wings spread over their head like night's own shadows, wider and wider, the wind rushed down from their beat, the head of it reared up and up, the human-shaped hands pawed dreadfully at the now bright-red, blood-streaming eyes. Frank's rifle hissed again. And again. He put in a new clip.

Sentient, the thing that had nested in Despair since the dawn of life, by the stench of it, the odor of a thousand-year-old abattoir swept outward on the wind of its wing beats. Frank retched, the rifle bobbed. He steadied, and it hissed again.

It lifted, the beating wings were a blur of power, the trees crashed as the wings beat against them; it lifted, the claws clenched and spread again, and a tree-trunk splintered—a tree that would have built a hundred houses.

IT LIFTED, and Hal clung to his leaf-hung perch with hands that ached with gripping, his heart was tearing his chest apart, his breath came and stood and came again. Up, up, up, and still it blotted out the light, still the terrible stinking wind of its flight, still the fear that stopped a man's blood in his veins.

Up and up and up, flight into safety, and then it roared, and dived like a space liner. Roared like Hell on a holiday, letting out the souls, roared like a planet giving birth, roared down upon them, diving with its wings driving it down. Skimmed the tops of the trees, the vast wingtips close enough to step on, trees crashing right and left, crashing and splintering and falling. Trees it would take both of them more than a day to cut through knocked down with a touch of those wings!

Up, up, up—and out of sight!

"Sorry I didn't bring two silencers!" said Frank.

Hal gulped his breath back to living pace again. His eyes stared and

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stared at the "nest." Bones and bones and bones—it was a nest built of bones! How long, how many years would it take to get that many bones together?

"You know, Frank, you're not as sorry about the silencer as you're going to be when I remind you, you said not to bring cameras."

Frank didn't try to smile. Both their faces were drawn and white, their limbs were shaking too much to try to get back to the canoe. They stood there, Hal filled with pride in his hunter, Farar. Terrific pride—in man!

"Do you think you managed to blind it?"

"I put bullets in each eye. It had three. If it's not blind, I don't know how to make it blind. If it *is* blind . . . wonder if it will *stay* blind? Some reptilian life-forms have remarkable healing powers. Limbs grow back on. Maybe eyes can grow back to sight again."

Frank put the breather back in his mouth. They descended the sloping trunk, got in the dugout.

"If that thing can think, and I swear it is full of knowing, like an old man; and if it can see—we may see it again."

They paddled slowly back toward the hill of ore. They began to set out stakes, marking off two claims. They had to be right. It took time. They had driven off the guardian, now they were claiming the spoils.

The water gurgled, a big bubble of air broke surface, and after it came a Brownie. He clambered to the bank, stood watching them. After awhile there were three again. Then there were four! Hal saw them, but decided to ignore them. When they finished they walked back to the row of little men standing gravely. They wore their packs today, and the breathers were in their mouths. Evidently yesterday had been an emergency, today was different. Today they meant to stay above the water for awhile.

"OSKY mar," said Hal genially, sitting down on a hummock and cleaning the dirt off his moccasins.

"Osky mar," they chorused, solemnly, unsmiling. They waited. Frank walked up.

Suddenly the little tubes flashed, and light flared and splashed around them. Hal grabbed his eyes, they hurt like blazes. When he took his hands away—*he couldn't see!* The little men had *blinded* them!

"Grimalkin say!"

One of them said that! Even as they were pulled to the water's edge and tumbled in, Hal was trying to figure that one out! "Grimalkin say!" If that meant what he thought it meant, they were in for it! It must be coincidence, it couldn't have possibly implied that . . . that the Grimalkin had ordered them blinded!

When they were pulled out of the water Hal's lungs were bursting. After he had coughed some of the water out of his lungs, he gasped:

"Did he say 'Grimalkin say'?"

"That's what he said." Frank's voice was far from unperturbed, but he seemed more cheerful than necessary.

"Does that mean *in English,* or mean in Venusian something else?"

"I suspect it means in English. Why do you think I shot that thing? Do you really think I wanted to get killed? *I knew, man!* It didn't matter that I knew, till I saw the girl. Then I knew what I had to do! The Grimalkin, Hal, *was a God.* The Brownies worshipped him. I *knew* that. You didn't."

"I don't get it. That's impossible. Nobody would worship that."

"If your ancestors worshipped the Grimalkin for a thousand years—you'd worship, too."

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"I would, I suppose. But where does the girl come in?"

"I guess you never read your fairy tales. The only way to understand Venusians is to read fairy tales. In primitive times, *people thought like that*. When they had a dragon to placate, they fed him a pretty girl. She was—*dragon-bride.*"

"I knew all about what was supposed to be in this swamp, Hal. *But I didn't believe it*. I thought the natives had lied to me; you know, tall tales. I came to you hunting the Bunae. Then I *saw* the photos of the Brownies and the earthgirl. That was when I really got suspicious. *If* they were true, like the natives had told me, then the Grimalkin *was* true, too."

"You said *she was?*"

"They can't feed her to that thing now. He won't be around for awhile, if ever."

"Dragon-bride. That girl . . . God! And I never tumbled."

"You're a dead game kid, Hal. But I was afraid knowing would upset you. Besides you wouldn't have believed me. I didn't use to believe the natives either, and they tell some wilder stuff than this. From now on, I'm making a study of Venusian folk-lore. Their fairy tales are so damn up-to-date."

CHAPTER IV

FRANK was talking to a little man outside their cell door. The bars were of wood but it was ironwood. A knife wouldn't cut it. He'd tried. Hal still couldn't see. Sitting in the dark, he tried to make out the words of the Venusian patter. Frank was saying some words over and over, learning the differences between this brand of talk and the one he was familiar with.

The talk went on and on. So did their blindness. The girl had been in to see them. She had been crying. Hal had put his hand through the bars and felt the tears on his hand as she squeezed it. She had said: "Papa, no, no!" The voice had given his heart a twist. It hurt *her* more than it did them! He could still hear her heart-broken words, over and over, sorrow and pain and love and wild music in the sweet voice: *"Papa, no, no!" "Papa, no!"*

He guessed she called them *papa* because she had been little and had known only her father. Her father had had hands like them. So she called them *papa*. She didn't need words, anyway. She had meanings as many as music, and the same kind. The wet tears on his hands told him more than words ever could.

They were in the hollow hill. He knew that much. It had been too short a trip to go anywhere else.

Day after day of blackness. Day after day after day listening to Frank chattering Venusian lingo to the little man who had to sit outside their door and guard them.

Gradually Hal found he could understand them. Occasionally Frank would explain a word to him, tell him what was said. As time went on he became extremely interested because Frank was busily occupying his time by pumping the whole past history of Venus out of the Brownie. These remnants of a once great people were the only intelligent creatures on Venus who really *knew* that history.

Day by day he absorbed the terrible history of a people whose very *base* was horror; of the building of their unspeakable civilization, incident by incident, village by city by state; and the fall again. Nights they would lie and talk over what they had learned.

IN THE early times there had been several races of people; tall, golden-

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skinned races, short squat mermen, a race of winged creatures that were not men but had intelligence—five different types of intelligence had vied for the planet.

But the little Brownies, who were called Bunae in their own language, had hidden in the swamplands in their hollow-hill villages long ago—just as they were doing now in the Swamp of Despair.

Not far from the Bunae villages, there was usually the nest of a Grimalkin!

The Grimalkin was the real dominant old first comer on the planet! He talked to the Bunae telepathically! He talked, and they listened and obeyed. They served him as eyes and fingers and locksmiths. Step by step, village by village, the men who served the intelligent Grimalkins conquered the other tribes around them, imprisoned them, enslaved them—and fed the war captives to the Grimalkin! Not that they fought very hard. The big creature they served did the fighting. He would swoop down upon a village eat a meal of people, and command them to surrender. Sometimes they tried to kill the monster, usually they just surrendered or tried to flee. But when they fled, there were the endless lines of the Bunae, blowguns and little flash tubes of blinding explosive light in their hands—to drive them back—to the slavery and the despair of watching their people used to feed the monstrous flying lizard every day.

When such a tribe, conquered and nearly all used up as fodder, finally became too few, the process was repeated—the monster moved and the tribe of Bunae followed, leaving a colony of their own to people and hold the conquered land.

By such irresistible alliance the dwarves and the monsters became the masters of the planet!

But the alliance contained the seeds of its own destruction. When at last there were no more slaves, no more enemy tribes, no more anything to feed the monsters—they learned about that!

They had become dependent on the monsters, and the monsters now fed on them! At first they chose by lot, as their conquered enemies had to do—who should be fed to the monster.

Then they revolted against the horrors they had so diligently nurtured for centuries.

They used their blinding explosive light tubes to blind the Grimalkins, and the blind *things* lay and starved; and they moved away from the stench of the vast dead bodies.

Over the whole planet the war between the dwarves and the monsters went on, and at last there were very few Grimalkins anywhere.

Alas, they had now no allies against the "savages" still hiding in the jungles. Farar smiled grimly as he heard the little man call the people hiding "savages." *Savages* against *horror* . . .

Now the reverse of their former conquering began, and village by village, fat Bunae city by city—the tall, straight, independent men of the forests took Venus away from the things that had served the winged monsters.

NOW it was all over. There were no more Bunae, only themselves, a few people, and one great old Grimalkin whom they had always served. And Frank had blinded their God! They would pay, those two. They would be fed to the God when he returned.

Such was their history, the history of a shameful alliance of a race of humans with a race of monsters. Sitting there in the dark, listening and staring at nothing, his blind eyes aching and aching, Hal saw that it was true! He

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had seen the giant winged thing! *Those two had faced and bested the beast that had once devastated a planet!*

"It seems unbelievable from a modern point of view," said Frank. "But when you know that many of earth's primitive tribes worshipped such things as bulls, alligators, vultures—there is hardly a beast or reptile hasn't been dignified with divinity by some fool group of primitives."

"Yes, even when they were supposed to be civilized, the Egyptians sacrificed to the river Gods by feeding girls to the alligators."

"I'm glad that I know what lived in the ruins, now. I had felt sad about the disappearance of a people. But now . . ."

"Venus was the Grimalkin's little nest, the whole thing under—a race of beasts!"

"That thing was considerably more than a beast. It could *talk* to them—they *talked* to it."

"Priests always talk to their God one way or another."

"You haven't heard the whole thing in the detail I have. It *had* thought, lots of it! It lay and telepathically commanded them. They were and are completely attached to its mind. Now they are like a people with their head cut off! They blinded us because we blinded their ruler!"

"If they were keeping the girl to feed to him at their ceremony why didn't they do it?"

"He wasn't interested enough to order it. She was only a small, skinny tidbit anyway. And they liked her, figured he would forget about her."

"I wonder if we're permanently blind?" Hal couldn't keep the break out of his voice.

Frank didn't say anything. Hal knew what he meant.

As the days passed their keeper grew increasingly careless about his job, and resentful that no one else took his place. He was absent for longer and longer periods.

They didn't know it was her at first. They heard her feet, soft and quiet on the hard soil of the cave, knew someone stood there. Then she whispered: "I have brought you the healing light. But do not tell anyone you are not blind. You must keep on acting as if you were blind. The Great One is returned to his nest. All are away to greet him and to make amends. Soon they will have a ceremony, and they will feed him. There are only you two, and me, and one other wild man for him. It is hardly enough."

THEY did not know what to say. They waited. Hal went to the bars and put out his hands to touch her. She was much in his mind. In his hands she placed a tube, showing his fingers what to do. He pressed the stud, and her hands guided the thing close to his face. After moments a light stole into his mind, brighter and brighter—he could *see* vague shadows about him. He could see the girl like a quivering shadow before him! He cried out—"Oh, God, *I can see!*"

"Quickly to the other papa," she said, in her weird English. Hal put it before the crouching shadow he knew was Frank. After long moments Frank took it from his hands, stared into the soft glow of it.

"It is very old. I got it from the witch-doctor's bags. He is gone to propitiate the Great One, to make the Grimalkin happy. *We must go before they come, papa!*"

"Mama, you're wonderful!" Frank was crying. Great tears rolled down his cheeks as he stared and stared at the quivering pale light in the tube. After a long time he handed it back

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to Hal. "Stare at it as long as it glows. I think the light that blinded us had the power of repolarizing the inner nerve screens of the eyes so that light left them unaffected, like inert matter. This glow-tube changes the polarity back. It is probably a simple magnetic secret if we understood it. We'll take it along. Now, open the door, sweet little savior that you are are, and *tell me where the guns are.*"

She fumbled with the long triangular key in the ancient black metal of the lock, and the door swung open at last. They were out in an instant, hurrying the girl along toward . . . They didn't know anything about their prison! Their eyes were astounded at the rich number of alien objects there were to see. The loot of the rich descended wealth of a nation lay stored in the long low rooms through which they fled. There were weapon rooms, from which Hal picked up a tube similar to the one that had blinded him. The other weapons, except for bows and arrows, were incomprehensible. There were even books, pictographs drawn on leather, and painted and decorated shields lined the wall, and everywhere there were statues of the Grimalkin, the hideous beast idolized, with spread wings and rampant claws grasping still other smaller monsters. Not so very long ago there must have been many more of them than they had thought lived here. But there was no time. They found their own breathing packs, their rifles and gear from the dugout all neatly piled in the end of the last room they came to. At one end of the room a hole, and in the hole black water was rippling.

"Quick, someone comes," cried Hal, pulling the girl back from the hole.

THAT round bald head bobbing in the water gave Hal a repellent sense of alien horror, now that he knew what a degenerate thing it was. A race that had built an empire upon the strength of a bloodthirsty monster! Frank grabbed the little man by the neck and hauled him out of the hole. He spoke to him in Venusian, and the little man made a quick answer.

"More coming, Worran. Keep the gun on them, while I grab them and take the tubes away from them. I don't feel like going blind again."

But it wasn't to be so easy. The girl gave a cry of fear, and Hal looked around just in time to catch the flare of the light tube. Blinded again, Hal knew that their jailer had been left behind and had seized the chance to take a nap. Waking, he had missed them and followed.

Standing there with his rifle useless in his hands, he remembered Farar's words, *"Never get excited, or fail to see everything that could harm you."* He had been looking in the direction from which the little man came, but he had not seen him till too late. He should have noticed him but he had been watching the water instead of the opening beyond. Did it take catastrophe to teach a man to watch things?

He could hear Frank struggling and cursing. The girl cried out again, and he heard a splash. After a time he was led back to the cell and locked in.

He was alone, and the blackness was doubly oppressive. The day passed, he heard the lack of faint sounds in the caverns about that meant night. Night dragged on, and he wondered if they had killed Frank.

Morning came, and he was dragged out. His arms were bound behind him, and he drew a deep breath as he heard the splash of the water tunnel ahead. The cold wetness and the falling were twice as bad when you could not see when they pushed you in.

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He was pulled out and walked along with the little patting footfalls of webbed feet somehow horrible around him. Presently a soft hand was placed in his hand, and the girl said—"Papa, no, no!" her voice mournful music.

"We're going to feed the monster?" he asked.

"Yes, yess, papa! Soon no more me, no more you. Grimalkin, ahh!"

"He's one hell of a God if you ask me."

"He is very old. Their papas, and their papas, and their papas, served him and fed him. He has *always* been *the Great One!*"

"Where is Frank?"

"Other papa ran away. The light did not strike him; he made his back go to it."

"Ran away? I don't believe it!"

The sense of abandonment, of being left to die, of a friend deserting him in the hour of need, was a very great hurt. In his blindness he could not bear to think of it. He turned his mind from that and squeezed the girl's hand.

"What is your name, girl? You have never mentioned it."

"Name, me? No name, me! Just girl, *puley.*"

"*Puley,* eh. That is Bunae for girl, eh?"

"The little ones call me *puley.* Long ago I was called a name, *Janey Boone.* Papa dead long ago, nobody name me Janey now."

"*Janey Boone!* A good old earth name! I thought so. Where else would you come from?"

THEY were pushed along through low branches, and got into boats. The paddles dipped, he could hear the breathing grow labored. After a time he heard the stirring of the vast might of that *thing* out of forgotten time. The great tearing breaths like winds, the stirring of the wings, the crash of branches as he turned his might. He must be restless or in pain.

"Are we getting near?"

"Soon we go in to *the Great One.* Then no more you and me!"

"No more you and me," Hal echoed, squeezing her hand. "Janey Boone, *brave girl.*"

Her voice was deeply sad but unshaken. "Always there was to be this for me. But the Old One never required it any more and they did not. Now he is angry and in pain. He moans . . ." Hal could hear the terrible roaring like a locomotive in pain just ahead. "I can see him, now! Soon we descend to him along the way of the bones. His eyes are bloody and black; something has hurt him."

"I *hope* it hurt him."

Underfoot he felt the crumbling, rolling bones, the stench of death was sickening. This nest of perdition had to claim that sweet child . . . and Frank, mighty hunter, ran away! He cursed him silently.

It was just then, as he expected any second to feel the vast mouth close upon him . . .

It was *then* he heard it. The high, nearly inaudible hiss—and knew it was Frank's poacher's silencer. *Again, again, again!*

The wings began their terrible stirring, he could feel the ground shake beneath as the legs drew up and took the weight. The terrible roar was deafening as *It* bellowed. Hal threw his arms around the girl and pulled her back and back. They crouched among the stinking bones, and the roaring went on, rising higher to a terrible keening, the wings beat and beat; he could feel the ground rise from the release of the terrible weight. Overhead the air-blast from the wingbeat beat down upon them, and Hal covered the girl's

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body with his own in case a wingtip should touch them. Up and up went the roaring. Up and up and died away!

The venomous hiss of the rifle still sounded. He could hear it plainly now in the suddenly painful silence. Hear the cry of the stricken little web-footed horrors as they fell. He heard the spiteful snap as the tubes went off, light flared even though his blind eyes vainly tried to see what was happening.

At last he felt a strong hand raise him, a strong friendly voice that touched his heart with the real meaning of friendship.

"I've still got the healing tube! They're all dead or crippled. We're safe, I guess. Now let's get out of this damned swamp and file our claim."

CHAPTER V

THE trip down the River of Doubt, with Janey Boone chattering at both of them, was the happiest time of Hal's life. Janey was irrepressible, her spirits, so long repressed by the threat of the monster and the gloomy ways of the little Bunae, found food for revel and delight in every sight and sound and word of banter. Her high, bird-like laughter set off the winged and scaled screamers in the jungle, and she loved to mock them so that they screamed back, swooping over the dugout in scores, scarlet and gold scaled; the Wiery birds trailing long green spines of beauty.

She delighted in relearning her language, which she had nearly forgotten, but about her own past she had little to say, she could not recall.

But she still had a fear, and she watched the cloud sheath constantly. At last Frank asked, "Do you think there are more Grimalkins?"

"Not more! Him, *the Great One.* He will follow if he can see again! His eyes got better when you drove him off before. He is like an old man, spiteful, revengeful—and he is *smart, like you!* He knows who hurt him, the little ones *told him.* He could not see to strike back, but *he will follow.* He does not smell you, he smells you with *yarva,* see!"

"*Yarva* yourself," kidded Frank.

"*Yarva is mind talk.* He smells people with it!"

"I *know* the Great One. I talked to him. I can *yarva* him far away, in pain and terrible anger, waiting; at night he moves to another place nearer us."

"Waiting till his eyes heal up again. Hal, we'd better step on it!"

"That would not matter. At night he gets around without eyes, by his *yarva.* In the daytime he always sleeps; the sunlight, the daylight, is bad for *yarva.* Blind, he cannot follow in the daytime. At night he flies overhead till he gets our *yarva.* Then he makes a nest there."

Hal imagined the great creature, hundreds of years old, venomously following his quarry, day after day. "Why doesn't he swoop down on us at night?"

"He is not sure he can *yarva* close enough. But when you get to your city home, *then* he can *yarva,* blind or not, the scent is strong, and he will kill *everyone!* This is his revenge! That is why I worry. When we get home he will strike that home to nothing! He is terrible, and he does not give up. He always thinks one thing, hate, hate!"

"Can you yarva the thing?" asked Hal, not smiling even a little.

"She's probably got it straight, she ought to know. I wonder what I can do to throw him off. He'd crash into that plastic dome and the mining settlement would be hash. Natives taught me a little *yarva,* it's true."

"How many bullets have you put into him, Frank?"

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The girl exclaimed excitedly as the canoe suddenly came within view of the strange city

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"About eight in the eyes, and a dozen around them. But you must remember the massive bone structure, even behind the eyes, would absorb any bullet I have without letting it in. Too, a reptile like that has a nervous system that's decentralized. Even a hit in the brain itself wouldn't be fatal. But infection may kill him, I don't know. His eyes were filled with matter and blood, and swollen areas around them. He was still half blind. He knew I was there but he couldn't *yarva* me close enough to grab me. He *had* to run away, he had to get away from my fire soon enough. The healing powers of Venusian creatures is much greater than earth, I have been told. I have hit quite small hairless deer what seemed like a heart shot, and then a year later killed the same deer. Cut it open, looked at the heart, found the heart itself healed, the scar right in its valves."

"We can't lead that horror back to the mine, Frank, if she's telling the truth. And she certainly is not lying, unless she's mistaken about the thing."

"I'm thinking, Worran. Thinking if she could *yarva* me its location . . ."

The girl pointed silently.

"The Old One sleeps over there, beyond where we camped last night."

"Why don't he attack?"

"He wants to kill *all* your kind, Frank. All hissing bullet spitters, like you!"

"And he's letting me lead him to them. That settles it. We can't go home."

"Talking to those little Bunae, Frank, I remember their telling you about the ruins, how they were built. Now, near every ancient city of theirs, is a nest for such a thing. Couldn't we set a trap in one of those, sleep in the ruin, and he'd nest there where the others did."

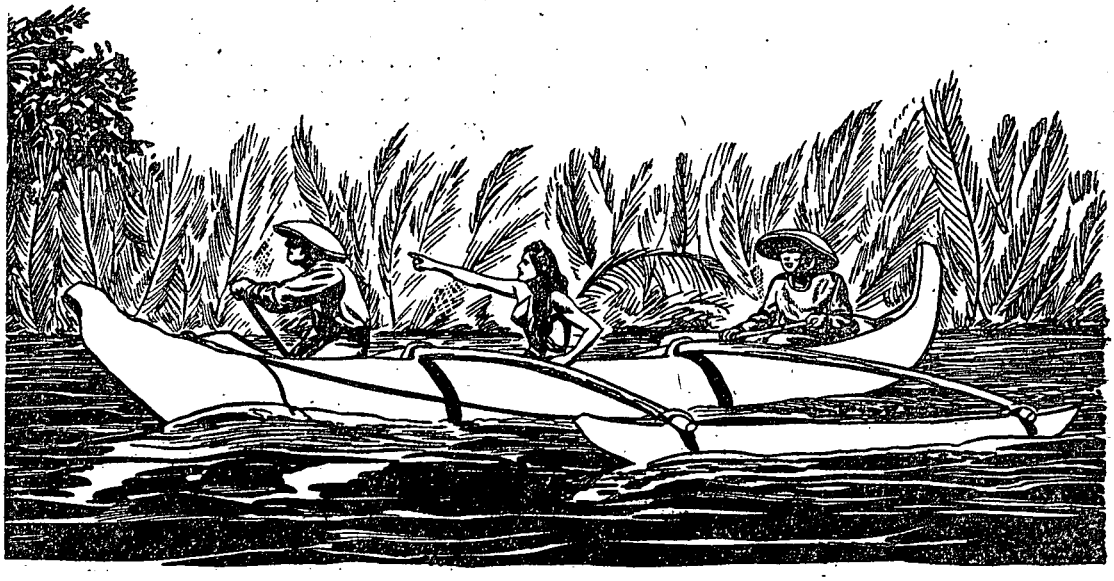
"If we had dynamite, and plenty of it."

"But we don't. So . . ."

"Even these forest giants, for a deadfall, aren't any too big."

"That's an idea, man, a deadfall. It would take work, but it might be done."

THE ruin lay along the side of a mountain, gloomy with the dead past, the tall towers crumbled and



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fallen, the wide walls covered now with giant creepers, snakes nested in the warm rock crevices, swarms of birds—the featherless flying reptiles that Frank called birds—took to the air at their approach.

It was quite a city once; the little Bunae had had atrocious taste, though. The walls that still stood were lined with the rock-hard gesso sculptures of the pot-bellied lords of the Bunae. Frank laughed as he remarked, "They were better fed in those days than the ones we knew."

There were pictured processions, whole populations praying to the Grimalkin monsters, and everywhere the same idealization of the monster; over doorways his wings spread in stone, on the walls he accepted his human victims in a lazy crouch. It was evident that once the monsters had had little need to hunt food, it was brought to them on its own feet.

"History of a planet," murmured Hal, grim with the ugly past pictured before him, a past of the torment and wreck of a planet's peoples . . . "It's no wonder the natives are backward today. They never had a chance!"

But Frank was hunting out the trail that led away from the city, that path beaten by a thousand thousand victims up the side of the mountain, steep but worn smooth, with stone steps at intervals. It was well marked. Along the way sculptures extolled the beauty of the great winged monster, and the servility of the pot-bellied little web-feet that served him.

"Probably this one's great granddaddy nested here, long ago."

They stood at last above a natural bowl, round and beaten hard by giant feet, about it the same tangle of wrecked trees and fallen trunks, though there were no dead trees here.

A ring of giant evergreens about the bowl leaned far outward away from the center, where long ago when they were young the saplings had been pushed away by the nestling weight of the monster.

Here and there the out-thrusting giants were crossed, and nowhere could Frank's eyes find a tree that leaned inward for his purpose.

"You can't fell a tree against its own lean," remarked Hal.

"These trees have done a lot of growing since a thing nested here. As big as anything I've seen. But they all lean away from the nest."

"If we stay here, he'll be here tonight, and it's nearly noon."

"Did you ever see a timber-slide?" asked Hal.

"No. I never saw much lumbering. You can't ship lumber to earth."

"Well, I did, and I want to show you how I think it can be done. Lumbermen make a long earth slide down the side of a mountain, then they cut the trees at the top, roll them to the slide and let them roar down. Get it?"

THEY ascended the mountain above the bowl of ancient horror, and sighted a line down to the exact center of the nest.

"Now we've got to clear every pebble and hump off that line, so that nothing diverts the descending weight. That's work, but it doesn't have to be perfect. There's a natural trough leading to that bowl, except for that little ridge above it that turned the water away. We've got to cut through here, and that's all."

"You've outlined a week's work, and we've only one light axe. Think of something better."

"Okay. We go up to the very top of the mountain and fell and strip the biggest tree. That's one afternoon's work if we plug it."

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"Then we point it down the hill, and hope it jumps that ridge and hits the big boy.

"We've got to get it ready to slide, and put chocks under it to hold it that can be knocked out easily. We've got to carry water to wet down the first part of the slide—and by then it'll be dark. Then we've got to take shelter till he lights. That'll be toward morning."

"Shelter?"

"You know they had underground places where they hid from the neighbor's monsters during attack. We've got to find one, that's all."

"After he settles and thinks he's safe in this ancient nest, we sneak up the mountain in the pitch dark—that's the part I don't like. We're apt to run into anything."

"Okay. We split up. You go back to the ruins with the girl, I stay here with a rifle and axe and wait till he lights."

"Why don't we all stay here?" Janey was pouting, prettily.

"He'd wonder. He yarva's you better than us. He knows you, Janey. You've got to be under cover, and you've got to *yarva* him to light here."

"Yes, he yarvas me more than you."

"Will he yarva you what we plan to do to him," asked Hal.

"He might know. Sometimes he is sharp."

"I'll be yarva'd to death if he does!"

"I will not let him," Janey was deadly serious.

"Well, let's go. It's the best we can do and the time is short."

THE ring of the axe filled the afternoon, and by twilight they had one great timber poised on rollers, the rollers lightly chocked. The lighter end was down the hill but they could not help that. Two men could do no more. With their last strength they chopped the end of the gigantic lop to a sharp point. Then they rested as the darkness swept down.

"Get going, Worran! You and the girl get under cover while there's still light. You'll have to run . . ."

Hand in hand the two ran down the dim ancient trail of sacrifice, Hal clutching his rifle in one hand, the girl in the other. The rain was beginning, great flopping drops, and Janey was laughing with the thrill of racing along beside him, leaping down the stone steps, sliding along the sloping grass banks.

The long twilight held, the ruined walls rose above them as they dashed through the gates, pounding pell mell along the deserted streets. Janey led him to the place unerringly; she knew how the little men built. They entered a low doorway, stooping along the down-sloping tunnel. Walking into pitch darkness, Hal's ears, sharpened by past blindness, heard the rustle of scales ahead. He stopped short, drew the girl back into his arms.

He pumped his hand flash, the generator hummed, the tunnel filled with light.

Crouching ten feet away lay a serpent. It was all snake, and it opened its maw and hissed. If it hadn't been a maw big enough to fall in, if it hadn't had a two-foot horny crest, if it hadn't shot its tongue out till it touched them with the forked tips, if . . .

Janey pulled him gently backward. Step by step, while he fumbled with the rifle and tried to keep pumping that hand flash so he could see it, they backed up. The snake writhed, one great pulse of strength, and it was again close.

Janey pulled him back. He dropped the flash, and the darkness was fear itself.

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He picked up the flash, pumped a light again. If he fired it would madden it; it would rage after them. If they kept backing up? They did. It followed, pulsing slowly along, trying to see what made the light, and would it hurt?

"*Yarva,* Janey, see what he thinks . . ."

Janey *yarvaed,* said: "He does not like lights. He is a night thing. Take the light away, or he will eat it."

Hal let the light die out, and they backed silently, step by step, and never knowing . . .

"Yarva, Janey."

"He is going to nest . . . He is glad the light went out. He wants to lay his eggs."

"*Her* eggs, Janey."

"Her eggs. What's the difference, he, her, huh?"

"It's a mighty important difference, sometimes. For instance, I'm a he, you're a her. That's important, isn't it?"

"*Papa!* Yes, yes!" She laughed, filling the tunnel with rippling forest music.

They squatted close up beside the door by which they had entered. Janey said she wanted to yarva the Great One down to nest. She could do it better close to the surface.

"So yarva works better above ground, eh?"

Hal was deeply interested in her telepathy. She said, "Yes, I hear outdoors better, and they hear me. You can yarva many things safe, you know."

"Explain."

"You can make things go away if you make them think so they do it themselves. I used to make the Great One not hungry when the fast days come. Then he forgets to ask for me."

"The way you made the birds sing along the river?"

"Yes, I make the Great One think of me as a flower, as a sound he likes to hear, never of to eat me, and so I am alive."

'Didn't he ever eat the Bunaes?"

"No, they are his servants, and they yarva him too. But the Great One yarva them too. Then they find the trails of the big serpents, and he goes to find them and eat them."

"Couldn't he find their yarva scent himself?"

"No, they all make silent sound. All animals do that, make silent yarva when hunted."

"Make a silent sound to me, Janey!"

SHE closed her eyes, and Hal distinctly felt the impression of nothingness, of silence. He would have sworn she was not there. He opened his eyes, and she was gone!

"Janey, Janey, oh hell! *Now* what's up?"

From outside came her merry laugh, and he went out into the dark and the rain and grabbed her close. She fell against him, peering up in the darkness, the great flopping drops striking her face. Her body was warm and soft and close, her laugh in his ears.

"I yarva you think of me, Hal Worran."

"You *know* what I think of you, Janey, *Janey!* You know, of course!"

Her face was almost visible, he felt that yarva of hers telling him glorious things in secret; he felt the infinite grace of what she pictured to his mind of her desire for him. He bent and kissed her sweet, soft, laughing mouth, pulled her back out of the rain.

"Never trick me like that again, Janey. I get very hurt when you are not there."

"Never, papa? Never, *maybe never?*"

So with soft music of words that

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meant so much to them and so little to anyone else they passed the slow hours of darkness, and Hal forgot the lean hunter waiting on the mountain top to kill the gargantuan winged threat that followed like a Harpy, never seen, always scenting them afar.

But Janey did not forget, and even as she kissed Hal, and laughed at the new and infinitely sweet sensation of young lips to lips, her fear-experienced mind was searching, listening, *yarva-ing* for the dread that would follow them.

Toward morning, the far beat of the wings came to her, her yarva reached and touched the mind of the Grimalkin, signed to him slightly that this was the place they camped, and signified fear and hiding, touched him lightly with the sensing of herself so that he was sure—and nearer and nearer came the beat and throb of vast wings.

She took Hal's hand then, he pumped the flash and they descended again toward the deep tunnels.

Even there the roar of his descent came to them, the thrash and beat and thump of him settling in the ancient nest of his forefathers, the nest that the girl's yarva made him realize was waiting for him. The roaring died out, the night quieted, the far fear-screaming of the wild at the descent of horror from the sky died away, and the night outside was silent again.

High on the mountain side above that grim ancient bowl Farar waited, leaning on his axe, listening and watching the black shadow swoop and hover and settle.

Waiting while the horrible sound died away, and there was no sound but the soughing of the thing's quieting breathing. Waited, and retched a little as the vast wingbeats sent the death stench of *it* up the slopes to him, and looked at the black sky with their faint far flashes of ever-lightning, listening, to the frightened sound of the forest life, cheeping and jittering and fleeing through the dark—away—away.

JANEY yarvaed again that hate smell of *it*, following relentlessly and hating, hating; waiting till it could kill all things that had hissing stings. Till it found the city where the man-thing sourced, and made sure there would be no more man-things like *that* one.

For long, for too long, it had ignored the man-things, but now was the time come to blood them till there was no more blood left. "Now, *soon*," Janey heard it think, "*soon* it would *know*, their trail would lead him to the home-nest of the man-thing that had struck him, and vengeance would be the Grimalkin's again."

Farar heard the deep soughing breath lessen and still, and the softer sound of sleep breathing come. He swung the axe, knocking the first small rock from under the log roller. Then quick he swarmed over the log and knocked out the chock on the far side, running back along the log to the heavier-burdened rollers at the butt and knocking out the heavier rocks and around the butt as the monster log stirred, and so at last the rollers were freed, and the weight of the great log groaned on the rollers as it moved, and moved faster, became an irresistible weight driving down, down—*down* toward the winged thing that could not be, *but was!*

Farar stood spraddle-legged, the axe held high like a brand, and the demon gleam in his eye as he faced again the terrible strength of the monster, remembered the time-horrored, *thinking* face of the thing, the awful stench of an age of killing upon it. His face was

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The huge pointed timber hurtled down the slope straight for the monster's body

a glory, was an eye-lightning cursing *down* upon the nest below. He was a spirit guiding the terrific rushing weight of the timber, shaft of gravity-borne endless mass, on and on; roaring its own defiance of all in its path, roaring and crushing aside boulders and trees and earth, rushing irresistibly down upon the bowl below.

That bowl of ancient undead flesh nested, raised its half-blind horror-face and felt the quake as of the avalanche; the down-rush of fear from above; felt the power of a greater strength than its own bearing down upon it, felt *fear* that it had not known ever. Fear of a greater thing struck it; it unfolded the vast wings, sprang erect upon those terrible haunches, clasped earth deep with wide talons, and the wings beat once, it lifted—lifted. . . .

Again up at the hiding-tunnel's entrance, little Janey Boone yarvaed ecstatically, feeling the fear and the lost, tearing loneliness of the horror; the strangeness of facing a power greater than himself, reveled in sensing the thoughts of terror and flight in the breast of that *thing*, that had never faced a thing that shook the ground.

As the wide wings beat, and it lifted up on its haunches to get its leviathan bulk airborne, Janey yarvaed desperately, telling it to *face its enemy* and *fight*, that no thing as strong as *he* need ever flee any other life; that this thing that rushed down was but a flea in the night, but a stomping beast of no strength.

AS IT lifted, these thoughts of anger and of fighting back made it hesi-

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tate, it settled once, and turned to face the down charging weight.

The great log hurtled over the slight brow of the bowl, lifted and hurled by the momentum, lifted and hurled straight at the breast of the monster.

That scream, as the sharped spear pierced clear through the joint of the vast wing and the body, pierced and tore and pinned the titanic weight to the side of the bowl as a vampire is staked to its grave—that scream—the ululating, hill-quaking terror of death and pain and utter defeat. That death—agonized scream from *it* that had lived a dozen lifetimes and never faced a thing great enough to make it fear—and now faced death—that unending ululation brought Farar bending to a tree for support to keep from falling with pain of hearing. The yarva-sensing of that pain made Janey bend her head into Hal's arms, sobbing with the ending of a strain that had been hers since she could well remember.

She wept there in his arms for long minutes, for an hour; and the light came strange and strong and new, the grey-white dawn of Venus.

Farar marched down the torn path of the tree slide, axe in hand and rifle in the other. As he marched he sang an old song his father had sung, though he did not know well what it meant:

"John Brown's body lies a'mouldering in the grave."

Farar stood above the great blood-thrashed bowl of ugly agony and marveled at the giant havoc among the age-old evergreens; the flung trunks of giant trees, the wide trenches gouged by tearing death-thrashing claws, the broken endless reaches of those sprawled folds of wings, the terrific life-strength of the thing.

The three vast eyes still stared malevolence up at him, the repellent slaughterhouse stench rose sickeningly, the sides still labored with its tearing great dying breaths. The whole green breast of the forest about the bowl was now but bloody-gashed earth and splintered trees.

Farar stood and looked at those eyes, and examined that trembling forest-giant spear that had plunged clean through the terrible body and struck itself so deep into the earth the vast weighty butt of the timber quivered still and hung there, forty-five degrees of suspended stripped white pole, the clean wood scraped off the bark in the long run down the mountain now splashed with great dripping blood-stains.

THE monster flopped once, and the blood rushed from the great hole in its side, the hot stench of it rose steaming, the vast claws scrabbled and scrabbled futilely as it still strove even against death to rise again. Farar wondered just how long it would take to die? Or would it die? *Was the thing unkillable?* The sides panted in great sighs, the limbs struggled on and on and on, and Farar mused above it like a Demon watching over the torments in Hell.

He noted the healed tiny wounds of his bullets that had smashed into those eyes, now but healed-over pinpricks on the eye's expanse.

Janey and Hal came up beside him and looked down and marveled at the terror and strength still in it, and Janey threw rocks down on it to tell it once and for all that she was not a servant like the Bunae. It ravened at them, the great stick of timber shook and Farar saw it move in its socket, swing over and back, and he was afraid.

"We are still in danger if that timber falls and looses him, Mr. Grimalkin is very far from dead. Go down and get

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in the dugout, I'm going to pump bullets into it to try and finish it off. When I come we will go, there's no need your watching the ugly business."

They would not go and leave him, but compromised by ascending the mountainside and watching from a safer distance. Farar stood and fired steadily into the vast body, picking out every spot that might give a wound in a vital spot, and the monstrous flopping and writhing went on. There *was* no way to kill it, and at last they started to descend the trail leaving the vast thing pinned there like an immortal vampire-ghoul on his titan's stake; praying that it was truly the spell needed to bind him forever.

"Yarva Grimalkin once more, Janey, and tell us if he is dying?" asked Hal, smiling gently.

"I did, and he doesn't know. He is weak, and he cannot get up and fly, and that is all he knows. He will die, I think."

Farar stood for a moment exulting in the hunter's pride in the catch, such a deed and such a quarry as would be sung of in hunter's camps on Venus so long as men of Venus bore weapons after quarry.

As he turned away he saw Hal approaching the dying carcass with the axe in his hand. Hal went up to the still grasping and ungrasping vast talon of the hind foot and began to jockey about trying to get in position to strike the still constantly moving claw.

"What the . . .? Get away from the thing, you'll be crushed!"

"Not leaving without proof! I'm getting one of these claws."

So, leaping about to avoid being crushed, Hal hacked and sweat and cursed and loosened the great bird-like claw in its socket. Farar made a rope fast to the tip, and so pulling and hacking, they tugged the claw free and up away from the less frequent thrashings of the giant.

BUT the pain of the last great indignity roused the beast again, and the vast haunches bunched and tugged, the blood spurted from his side as he raised horribly, straining against his stake to get over on his front again.

With continual swaying and vast powerful wrenching, the tall swaying butt of the timber swung in a wider arc, and suddenly loosened, and swayed down and up, and down again, to crash thunderously on the high rim of the bowl, the weight of the butt over the high rim bearing down on the lighter point in the creature's great side, lifting thus with leverage and so raising the weight he could not raise himself. Raised it till its vast legs dangled and reached for the ground, the terrible wings spread and whirred once and the leverage of the suspended butt of the log bore down and as his wings beat, the weight tossed the sharp end high, so springing the Grimalkin suddenly into the air as a boy would fling a frog from a bent spear.

Up and up, turning end over end, the great wings beat at first feebly, then, feeling again the rush of wind about him, and believing himself to have raised with his own strength perhaps, the wide wings spread naturally, the long glide and circle on those sky-filling wings of horn and leather and aged scars and stench told them that it was again moving under its own power.

Frank seized the girl's hands and began to race with her for the shelter of the ruined city, for the persistence of life in that undead carcass might be such as to cause it to seek on and on after them till it found them in the sparse shelter of the great trees with great spaces between. It did so glide

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and hover like a hunting owl, stooping again and again for some shadow that it hoped was its enemies.

At last, even as they crouched and ran through the gates of the ruins, they saw it rise from its following of them and fly straight across the city, just clearing the trees beyond, on and on, heavily in a ragged wavering flight.

"We didn't kill it! It wasn't really dead. It was just badly hurt!"

"I wonder if anything short of total destruction could kill it?"

"What was it going to do, Janey?" asked Frank.

"It is going to do what it did before, hide and get well and find us again."

"I'm going home. That thing cannot find us."

"Is it going back to its swamp home?"

"If it can get there. But it weakens; if it falls, it will die."

THEY put the nightmare out of their consciousness, and three went down the River of Doubt. Happiness went with them, singing in the forest-wild voice of the girl; singing in the heart of Hal who had got her promise, *yarva promise true!*

Something like happiness was singing in the heart of Farar, who had to his credit the besting of the greatest fighting beast of a whole planet. So the fabled Grimalkin of Venus did not exist?

Unknown to them, Janey found yarva talk to make with distant friendly minds, and told the minds of the glory of their deeds and of the dying monster they had beaten and which had fled away to die.

So, singing in yarva-style communication, far ahead of their canoe went the news of their exploit. It was a great warrior's song that was passed along, and thrilled the hearts of the web-fingered natives who knew what the monster was and how unkillable.

So it was that as they rounded at last the grey-walled moss-draped curve of the last mighty bend of the river above the mining camp, their destination, their paddles ceased their rhythm. Surprise and even fear struck them, for so many native craft they had never seen before in one place.

Along the two wide-separated banks of the great river moved two lines of the long high-prowed ceremonial craft, hung with flowers, with maidens and women among the paddlers, and all chanting a famous war-chant of honor, sung only upon the return of a hero.

The webbed hands drove the paddles rhythmically and beautifully. The *song of victory* swept across the water to them as the dugouts circled and surrounded them and the maidens tossed flowers upon them so that they moved in a sweet rain of blooms and laughter and cries of admiration and the great ancient song of honor to them ringing and ringing, the water flowing with flowers.

Farar's keen hard eyes softened and became filled with a proud moisture of gratitude to these his native friends—for he alone of the three knew what honor this was, how very few ever won the ceremony of the song of victory. And no earthman had ever received this accolade before.

So escorted, they swept down to the landing near the great grey banks above which and back above the mighty trees reared the great glittering bubble of plastic which was the mining city of the earthmen. *In there* was miner-work and noise and earth-boring toil and soiling-smoke. *Out here* was singing and rejoicing and heartwarming praise and a people who loved them for what they had done. Farar knew a truth, this day.

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Cries of fear filled the air as the grimalkin crashed down upon the plastic dome of the city . . .

THEY marched up to the gates of the plastic bubble, Farar and Worran carrying the great claw on their shoulders, and the weight bent them. Clinging to Hal's arm was Janey, bright and happy and smiling with yarva talk to the otherwise silent natives. For many of them knew how to speak to her, and she was their friend now.

Suddenly, in the midst of this fun and deeply grave honor and flower-strewn path and singing voices, the workers and tradesmen inside coming out to the great gate to see what was

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going on and joining in with the smiling throng . . . suddenly, Janey gave a shriek, and seized Hal's arm and Farar's so that they staggered and dropped the weight of the claw.

"Grimalkin come!" she screamed, and tugged the two men off the wide way of the city gate and into the forest beside.

Screaming down like a diving plane came the avenger, roaring to be heard, now. For Janey had heard his hate thought—filling the sky with wings, beating, beating—to crash down upon this place and kill all who would wound him! Never, *never* should another face him.

His weight struck the crown of the glistening plastic and buckled it in great tearing rents that ran across like shattering glass, but the stubborn stuff held its shape although the crown was torn across.

Poised there on the top of the glistening bubble of the city-to-be, he was like the doom of the past awakened, the dread past of Venus awakened and terrible again. He roared, his great scorpion-like tail lashed down, and cracking plastic crevices ran from each blow like lightning from a thunder cloud.

He beat at the glistening tenacity beneath him with his great horny jaws, beat and tore with his vast bird claws, and the whole city roof became a spiderweb of cracks running and interlacing and the fabric bent and gave beneath him till he sat in a bowl of cracked transparency and roared defiance and rage.

Farar watched, and crouched there; with the people who had so honored him fleeing in all directions through the forest, and from the city gates streamed the earth-men. As they streamed out, the monster reached down and gathered up a claw-full of screaming, shrieking humans and mouthed them bloodily.

Farar swung up his rifle, scuffled from out his pack the small cylindrical gadget and fastened it to the muzzle, took aim through his telescopic sights, and fired. The monster roared pain, and dabbled at his eyes, and picked up yet more people and stuffed them in his maw.

FRANK fired, and fired again. The vast sickening ugliness slid purposefully down the side of the city shell like a child down a sliding board, and began to beat at the smaller trees and bushes along the trail. Carefully he flattened and beat at the area about the trail, making sure no thing lived, for he knew now that the thing did this stabbing of him from close at hand, was hidden in the leaves. Like a dog snuffling out a mouse, he snuffled among the flattened mess of branches and torn earth, making his great claws scratch in the way a chicken scrabbles for a worm.

Hal and Janey were now running far back in the shadows of the forest, runing hand in hand. Suddenly Hal tore loose his hand, and turned and left Janey, running furiously back toward the place he had last seen Frank. In his hand was his unsilenced rifle, and as he did not see Farar, he stopped and took a bead upon the great black center of the pupilo of the eye, and fired. The shot cracked out in the horror of silence and the monster sat up like a dog begging, pawing at his eye and screaming, then bending again to search the bushes.

Hal fired again, and the noise drew the great eye, it saw him. Hal turned and ran, in the other direction from Janey's position, and the thing hopped grotesquely over the trees, and landed ahead of his fleeing, waiting to seize

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him as he appeared.

Hal stopped, noting that the vast wound in the side was not healed, but was raw and green with infection, with maggots and great vermin-like white snakes in it.

He drew his gun tight to the shoulder, taking steady aim, his last had missed the eye entirely. *Crack*—and the monster pawed his eye and hopped madly after the sound, and Hal ducked and crawled swiftly right toward where the thing had sat when he first fired.

Thus crabbing backward into the mess of wrecked branches where it had searched, he came upon Farar, lying unconscious among the bloody thrashed leaves and earth and splintered limbs.

Hal took his rifle with the silencer and the telescopic sights, and left his own lay there, and squatted on his haunches, sighting till he got the eyes again.

So the game went on, endlessly he sighted and fired and scrambled under the covering leaves away from the searching eyes far above him.

A grim idea came to him, and he led the hunt, not knowing which was the hunted—ever toward the wide burned place where the rockets landed and took off from earth.

But he had no chance to put it into effect, for he saw the circling plane in time and picked up his heels and ran like a deer.

The bomb fell right beside the wide wings, the eyes upstaring at the flying plane swooping so near—just missed crashing square into the harpy face of it.

The concussion knocked Hal Worran flat, and merciful unconsciousness came to him for a second. When he rose and turned to look, there was a great smoking crater in the earth, and a great red scattered mass of flesh and bits of leathery wings, and hunks of torn limbs, and huge bones splintered and lying about.

Hal quietly dropped his rifle and dragged his legs wearily off after Janey, who was not going to be fed to any Grimalkin, *now!*

THE marriage ceremony took several days, for feasting was the native custom, and somehow he *had* to invite the diffident green-skinned men who had so welcomed them home. Janey yarva'd that they would always be welcome among them if they were included in the ceremony.

Farar, who had not been badly hurt, kissed the bride as a best man should, the natives brought hides of soft green serpentskin, the white and gold furs of the *Lafg* for rugs for the bride, and dresses of the soft red leather from the hairless deer.

* * *

The Swamp of Despair echoes now to miners' drills, and rattling conveyors. Above the deathly green mists rises the greatest of all Venus' cities shells. High upon the gleaming clear plastic wall are the words—

Worran and Farar, Inc.

The silence of Despair is broken forever.

For all his wealth, Farar likes to spend his time cruising the great rivers of Venus on long trips, hunting and exploring.

Sometimes Worran and Janey Worran go along on these trips, *when the kids are off at school.*

But the purple and gold serpents of the swamp do not like the new order of things, at all.

THE END

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Who Sups With the Devil

by S. M. Tenneshaw

VERY carefully he inserted a .38 cartridge into the cylinder of the revolver. Then with as great care he snapped the cylinder shut and stared down at the weapon.

His hand wasn't shaking. He was glad to see that. But then, he thought, why should it? Wasn't this what he wanted? Wasn't this the way out—the final release? . . . All he had to do was raise it to his head and pull the trigger. Then the pain and pounding would stop. He could feel it now, that pressure in his head, and the dull, steady, monotonous pounding of pain that never left him. Yes, it would stop—and he would be free.

Free.

He smiled a little at that. After nearly three hundred years he would be free. And there was nothing the devil could do to stop him. He had made up his mind.

Slowly he raised the gun. What was that game that had come out of the last world war? Oh, yes, they called it *Russian Roulette*. He smiled again. Maybe even the devil would wince at the game.

He twirled the cylinder.

The muzzle felt cool against his temple. It almost seemed to soothe the ache and pressure that throbbed within his head. Very slowly his finger tightened on the trigger.

There was a sharp click.

He smiled to himself. He had hit an empty cylinder. Then, once more his finger tightened. Another sharp click.

Slowly he lowered his hand. He

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stared at the gun with a sort of curious interest. The smile was still on his thin dark lips. Two gone, and four to go.

He put the muzzle at his forehead this time. He could see his finger tightening, see the whiteness of the flesh around his knuckle as the hammer of the gun was forced back. Another click.

He pulled the trigger again. A click. Two more. One out of two.

He pulled the trigger. Click.

One . . . The smile was broad on his face now. And then a stab of pain shot through his head. A mercilous pounding, a throb and a roar of agony.

He pulled the trigger for the last time.

Click.

His hand was shaking. He knew it.

He lowered the gun from his head and stared at it, and for an instant felt a fear sweep through him. Was it possible—

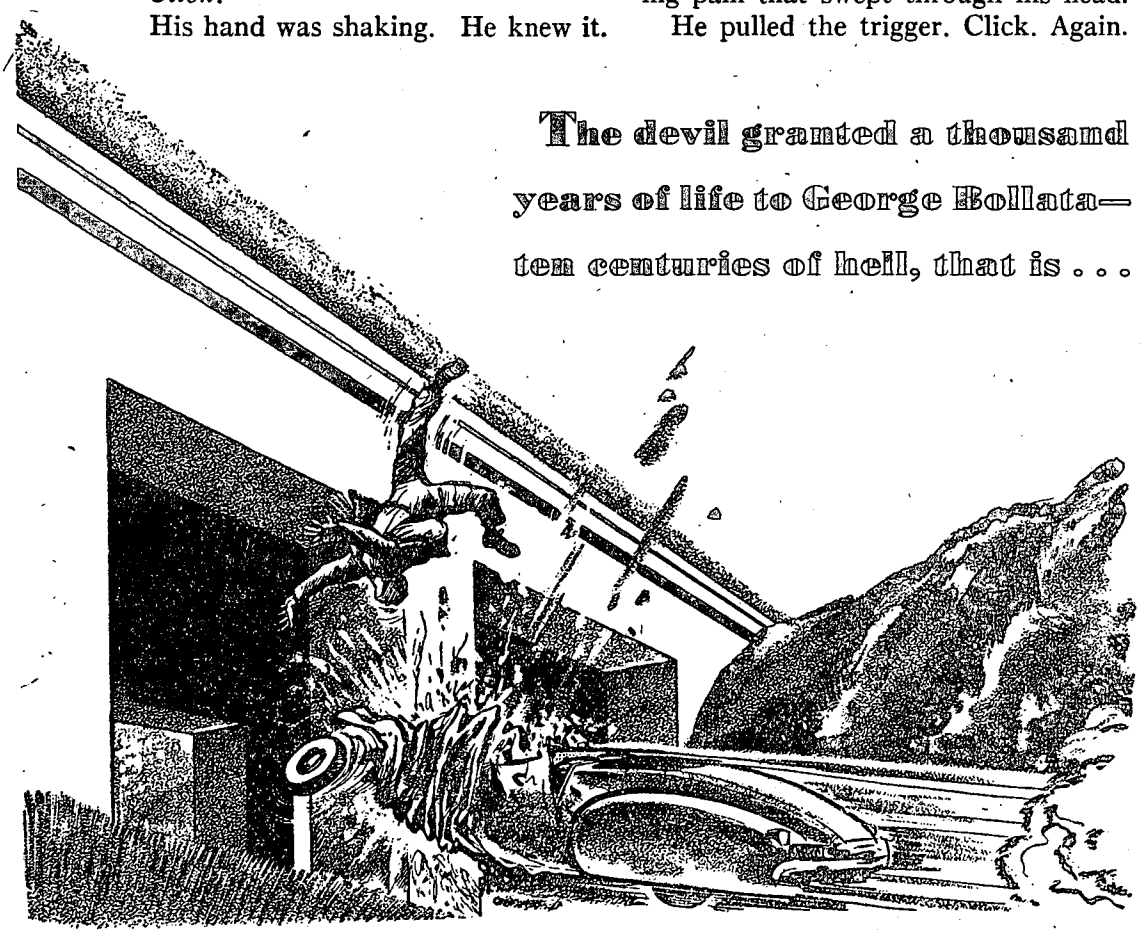
He snapped open the cylinder and looked at the single cartridge in the gun. In the center of the cap was a neat puncture. A puncture that only a firing pin could make.

His breath came faster as he stared at it. It couldn't be true . . .

His hand reached across the desk to a box of cartridges. Swiftly he loaded the gun with five more shells. Then he snapped back the cylinder and raised the gun to his head again. This time the muzzle felt hot against his skin. And it didn't soothe the ache and roaring pain that swept through his head.

He pulled the trigger. Click. Again.

The devil granted a thousand years of life to George Bollata—ten centuries of hell, that is . . .



There was a vast roar of sound, and a twisting, tearing shriek of metal . . .

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Click. Again, again, and again. *Click—click—click.*

"No!" His voice was hoarse and tinged with fear. "No! I won't let you! *You can't stop me!*"

His hand shook as he pointed the gun at the baseboards in the far wall of the room. He pulled the trigger.

There was a dull, flat roar. The gun jumped in his hand, and across the room, splinters of wood flew as the bullet imbedded itself into the wall molding.

He pulled the trigger again. Another roar.

He put the gun to his head. He pulled the trigger.

Click.

THE gun slipped from his fingers and fell with a clatter on the top of the desk. Dimly he heard a pounding at the door. Then he saw the door open and a small, wizened man stare into the room with fearful blinking eyes.

"Boss! What's wrong? I heard shooting—"

He didn't say anything. He sat, unmoving in his chair.

"Boss—are you hurt?"

Slowly his breath seemed to come back. And from somewhere, deep within his head, deep amid the roar and stab of the pain, he thought he heard a single soulless peal of laughter. Then he shook his head.

"Nothing's the matter, Blinky. I was just testing my gun . . ."

Blinky looked down at the gun on the desk top, and his eyes twitched rapidly as he looked around the room and finally saw the bullet holes in the wall baseboard.

"Gosh, boss, you oughtn't to shoot the place up like this. Look what you done to the wall—"

"Shut up!"

Blinky took a step backward and then stopped. He stared at the man behind the desk, saw the sudden twisting of pained features, and then hurried around the desk.

"It's your head again, ain't it, boss? You got the pains again—maybe I should call the doc!"

He laughed loudly. "You fool! What good can *he* do me! What good can any of them do me!"

"But Boss," Blinky protested, "the doc knows what to give you for that tumor! And you can't be sick for the job tonight!"

Slowly he turned in his chair behind the desk. He looked at the twitching eyes of the little man before him. Then he smiled. "No, you're right, Blinky, I *can't* be sick for the job . . . Get my car for me."

Blinky frowned. "You going out, boss? You want I should come along?"

He shook his head. "No, Blinky, I want to take a drive, alone. Get the car."

The little man hesitated. "How long you gonna be gone, boss? The boys always get nervous before a job, and—"

"I won't be gone long, Blinky. Get the car!"

"Yes, boss."

With a shrugging of his small shoulders, Blinky sidled quickly out of the room.

Behind the desk, the man sat and looked down at the gun. Then his eyes traveled across the room to the baseboards. He looked at the holes in the wood. A tremor swept through him as his voice whispered hoarsely: *"Long may you live, George Bollata. For a thousand years with the compliments of Satan. A thousand years . . ."*

He laughed then, a short, hysterical laughter. A thousand years of hell. A thousand years of pain and misery. Oh, yes, the devil had been very shrewd. He had made the bargain, knowing all

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along what would happen. The devil had been very smart.

He straightened in his chair. But *was* the devil so smart? Could he force him to hold the pact? He looked at the gun on the desk, and again, amid the roaring in his head he seemed to hear that evil laughter.

He shook his head again. It always seemed to help. It drove away the laughter, anyway.

Well, he would see. The gun had failed. But there were other ways. He smiled again as he thought about that. And the pain eased a little . . .

The door opened and the little man came back into the room. "I got the car outside, boss. Are you sure you don't want me to drive you? If you're sick—"

"I'll drive myself, Blinky. I'll be back in a little while. Take care of things while I'm gone."

Blinky nodded, his eyes twitching. "Sure, boss, sure. Everything's set. The bank will be a pushover."

George Bollata didn't say anything. He just walked past Blinky and out of the room.

HIS hands gripped the wheel of the car and his eyes switched from the speedometer back to the road. Sixty-five, and the needle was crawling higher.

He saw the scattered buildings at the outskirts of the city flash past. They were nothing but a dim blur to his eyes. And far ahead, he saw the underpass of the railroad crossing. He gripped the wheel tighter and pressed his foot to the floorboards.

The roar of the motor grew louder as the car spurted ahead. He watched the distance shorten between the car and the concrete pillared underpass ahead. He glanced down at the speedometer. Ninety, and going higher.

This was it. The moment he had been waiting for. The gun had failed. But *this!* It would be impossible to live through it. Ninety-five. . . . Three hundred years. Three hundred years of hell. But it would end. It would end.

The underpass shot closer, closer. One hundred miles an hour.

He held grimly to the wheel. His eyes stared in fascination at the solid pillar of concrete looming in front of him. Closer—closer—closer—

There was a roar of sound too vast for his ears. There was a twisting, tearing, shrieking impact of metal too loud to be heard. There was what seemed to be an instant of blinding, shocking pain. And then . . .

THE round fat face was smiling at him. Seated behind a large teakwood desk, the face seemed to sit quite at ease upon the round, lumpy body beneath it.

"Well, George Bollata. We meet again."

Slowly, he focused his eyes on the fat, smiling face. Slowly then, slower still, he glanced from the fat face to the room around him.

"I still have the same offices, Bollata, as you can see."

Yes, he saw. He saw the old-fashioned furniture, the deep rug with the woven serpent in it staring up at him with red-threaded eyes. The same block of wood in the center of the desk with the burnt letters: *A. Mephisto, Counsellor.*

Yes, he saw. He saw them all too clearly. Just as he had seen them that day three hundred years previous when he had walked into these very same premises in the heart of London.

"How—how did I get here?" his voice came hoarsely. "I was in Chicago, and—"

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He remembered the car, the concrete underpass, the crash! An exultant shout leaped to his lips but was stilled before it could be uttered as the fat face laughed at him.

"Don't jump to any conclusions, Bollata. Yes, I know you are thinking about the automobile accident. That is why I brought you here."

"You brought me?" Bollata asked hoarsely.

"Exactly. It would seem that you are trying to break your part of the bargain we made. I've had my eye on you for quite some time."

"Bargain!" Bollata got to his feet and leaned across the desk. "What kind of a bargain do you think I got? A thousand years of life in exchange for my soul. A thousand years of hell with a brain tumor that's driving me mad!"

The fat face smiled. "Sit down, Bollata. . . . There, that's better. And what may I ask have I done to back down on my part of the bargain? Nothing. I took your case when you were in the shadow of the hangman. I offered you one wish in exchange for your soul, there being some doubt of its fate at the time. You agreed to my terms and asked for a thousand years of life. I granted it and saw that you were set free."

The fat man picked up a sheaf of papers from the desk and looked at them. "Your life has been a full one, Bollata. You've taken advantage of your pact with me to commit every crime known to man—and I must say, with a great deal of success. The law has never caught up with you. You went to America a hundred years ago and set yourself up as the Caesar of the underworld. You've profited very well. You've also taken your own freedom in your hands many times, but that has been your own risk. I've saved you from death times too numerous to count. My part of the bargain has been kept. But now you are trying to back out of your end."

Bollata gripped the sides of the chair he was sitting in and stared hatefully at the fat smiling face across from him.

"You haven't kept your part of the bargain! This brain tumor—for over a hundred years I've suffered with it—"

"Yes, I know," the fat man shrugged. "And I've seen that you came through six brain operations successfully."

"But it always comes back! And each time it gets worse! I can't stand it!"

The fat face hardened and the eyes set deep within it grew cold. "That is quite lamentable, I'm sure, but is no part of our bargain. You had your chance to wish for long health, but you chose long life. My duty is only to your life. And must I remind you that your duty is to protect it for me?"

Bollata glared at the fat man. Then suddenly a crafty smile spread over his thin lips. "If I'm still alive, how did I get here? I hit that underpass at a hundred miles an hour!"

Mephisto laughed. "You cannot die by your own hand, George Bollata. Just as your gun failed, so did your automobile wreck. I only brought you here to straighten out the matter. I want no more of these attempts. They will avail you nothing. You will live for the thousand years you requested, and then . . ."

The voice of the fat smiling man seemed to grow dimmer, as did the room around him. The light wavered, the room started to whirl, and it seemed as if he were speeding into a stygian well.

"Farewell, George Bollata. And remember, you cannot die by your own hand. I will see you at the completion

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of our bargain."

The darkness whirled faster around him, and the voice faded into a booming peal of laughter. Then, nothing . . .

HE WAS aware of hands pulling at him.

"Boss! My God, boss!"

Slowly his eyes opened. He was laying on a sloping stretch of grass. Kneeling beside him, Blinky was anxiously pulling at his arms. Slowly he sat up. He stared dumbly at the wizened little man for a moment. Then his eyes glanced at the concrete underpass a short distance away. He saw a twisted mass of metal wrapped around one of the huge pillars, a twisted mass of metal that was all that remained of the car he had smashed into it.

"I saw the whole thing, boss! I followed you because I knew you was feeling bad! I saw you hit that concrete, and boss, it was a miracle! Just as the car smashed into it you was thrown clear and up here on the grass. My God, boss, what happened?"

George Bollata ran a hand wearily across his forehead. If it hadn't been so tragic he would have laughed in Blinky's face. What had happened . . . Could he tell him that the devil had thrown him clear of the car just as it hit? Could he tell him that he had been taken across time to a small law office in a cheap, rundown section of old London? Could he tell him that he had sat there and talked to the devil himself?

"It was an accident, Blinky. I got a pain and couldn't see where I was driving."

"Gosh, boss, you sure had a narrow one that time. It's like I said, it was a miracle. Look at the car, why there ain't a nut or bolt left of it!"

Bollata nodded. "Yes, Blinky, it must have been a miracle."

Blinky nodded, his eyes twitching. "We better get out of here, boss. The cops'll be along any minute and we don't want to have to answer a lot of questions. . . . Are you sure you're o.k.? Maybe we better head for Doc Gorson's."

Bollata shook his head, getting to his feet. "I don't need the doc. Let's get out of here."

Blinky shrugged and led the way to his car.

HE SAT behind his desk again. He stared at the top of it and ran his finger along the smooth surface. He had been sitting there for over an hour, staring at the top of the desk, and not seeing it. His mind was on other things. On the pains in his head. On the pressure that made him want to scream. On the interview he had had a few hours ago with the devil. Especially on that. He had been doing a lot of thinking about that interview. There was something about it that he wanted desperately to remember. Something that had been said. Something that he knew he should remember. But he couldn't. Maybe it was because of the pain in his head.

He leaned forward and held his temples in his hands. He tried to push the pain away but he couldn't. And over and over in his mind went the past three hundred years. Murders, robberies, kidnappings, and a score of other crimes. And every one of them he had successfully manipulated. He was too smart for the police. He had always been. He had three hundred years experience at it. And he would have seven hundred more.

Seven hundred more years. Seven hundred years of power. Seven hundred years of pain. More operations. There would be more. There would

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have to be. Dr. Gorson had already operated twice in the past twenty years. And soon he would have to get another doctor. It was always that way. People grew old around him. Things changed. New buildings, new faces, new life. But he never changed. He looked like a man of thirty-eight, and he would look that way until a thousand years were up.

And after that? . . . He thought grimly about his soul. Soul. A four lettered word. Was there such a thing? He had seen many men in his three hundred years. He had killed many men. But he had never seen a soul. He didn't care very much. What difference did it make? You lived, and you died. But so few men ever really lived. A few short years and then death. But he had a thousand. And a malignant brain tumor that made it seem like a million. Would it ever end? Could he stand it that long? Was there no way to beat the devil at his own game?

The door opened and Blinky came into the room.

"Everything's set, boss. The boys are waiting. We've got a half hour yet before the bank examiners leave. Boy, what a haul this is gonna be. And what a casing we gave that place! I sure gotta hand it to you, boss, knowing just how long them examiners stay every month. We oughta get a half million out of this!"

George Bollata nodded. "Yes, Blinky, I know all that. We'll leave in a few minutes."

Blinky nodded, his eyes twitching. "Right, boss, and if you're still feelin' bad I'll do the driving. You don't want to take your life in your hands that way."

Bollata had started to get up. Suddenly he sat back in the chair. He stared at the little man in front of the desk. "What was that you said?"

"Huh, boss? I didn't say nothin' except you shouldn't take your life in your hands that way."

Bollata felt a tremor sweep through him. Something clicked in his mind. Something that he had been trying to remember.

"What's the matter, boss, ain't you set to go?"

Bollata waved his hand toward the door. "I'll be along in a few minutes. Get down to the cars. See that everything is all set."

Blinky shrugged his shoulders. "O. K. boss. But we better get going—"

"Do as I say!" Bollata snapped.

Blinky hurried from the room, closing the door behind him.

A slow smile spread over Bollata's face. "So I shouldn't take my life in my hands," he said. And then he remembered what the devil had said: *"Remember, you cannot die by your own hand . . ."*

Yes, that was it. He had found it, the one thing he had been trying to remember. The one thing that the devil had said. The one thing that would enable him to break the pact. To release him from the bond he had made.

"You cannot die by your own hand." He repeated the words aloud. And the smile grew on his face. *But he could die by somebody else's hand!* He could die if he were smart enough to arrange it!

His thoughts flew to the bank job that was all set. It was fool-proof. Nothing could go wrong. He had planned it that way for months. It would go like clockwork. Once the bank doors were opened to let out the examiners, his men would rush inside. It would only take a few minutes to loot the vault, forcing one of the examiners to open it. He had even made sure with inside help that the automatic

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clock lock on the vault needed repairing. It would be opened manually. Of course there would be a chance of having to kill some of the bank men, but that didn't matter.

Not until now. For as he sat there his mind turned over a plan. A way to end the bargain he had made with the devil. A way to die. A way to die by someone else's hand.

Slowly his hand reached out for the phone. He lifted the receiver to his ear and after a moment said: "Operator, give me police headquarters . . ."

HE SAT in his car a half block from the bank entrance. A nervous tension swept through him as the minutes sped by. It was almost time.

He could see, spaced at intervals along the block, the other two cars. His men would be waiting in them, waiting for the moment the bank doors opened. Beside him in the front seat, Blinky carefully fingered a forty-five automatic.

"Nearly time, boss."

Bollata nodded, pulling the thirty-eight revolver from his shoulder holster. Yes, it was nearly time. His head throbbed as he thought. Throbbed and grew larger, swelling with pain. Yes, it was time.

And then, slowly the bank doors started to open. He could see a small group of men in the opening. It was time.

"Let's go, boss!" Blinky said sharply and opened the car door.

Bollata jumped from the car and saw men leaving the other two cars a short distance away. He saw the short barrels of sawed-off shotguns, and the snub, ugly muzzles of machine guns. His men were ready.

They were traveling swiftly across the street now. Bollata raced ahead of Blinky. He wanted to be there first. He had a reason. His lips were thin and tight as he thought about it. He had the best reason any man ever had.

Somewhere down the street came a long sharp blast of a police whistle. It was repeated from the opposite end of the street. At the same moment, police cars pulled around the corners at either end of the block and uniformed men started to pile out.

"Boss! The Cops! It's a trap—let's get outta here!" Blinky screamed.

And at the same moment a series of explosions shattered the air in front of the bank as men with guns fired from the open doors at Bollata and his men.

Bollata gave a quick glance around him. His men were racing back to their cars. At the same time, the police opened fire from both ends of the street. He saw some of his men fall in their tracks as bullets smashed into them..

A shout of triumph welled from Bollata's lips as Blinky screeched in terror behind him.

"Boss! Run for it, boss! Bo—"

Blinky's voice was cut off by the sharp chatter of a police machine gun. He crumpled on the pavement a few feet away from Bollata.

A grim smile formed on Bollata's face as he turned to face the oncoming police. He raised his gun in his hand and took careful aim.

His gun blasted. Again and again. And he saw two policemen fall to the street. He screamed in glee at the top of his lungs: "Come and get me! I've got a bullet waiting for you! Come and get me!"

He fired again. Another policeman fell. Savage triumph swept through him. It couldn't be much longer now. They had seen him kill at least three men. And he was standing in the middle of the street, taunting them, waiting for the final barrage of fire that

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would cut him to pieces, that would smash the last vestige of life from his body.

A machine-gun chattered. Rocks and splinters of rocks flew up from the street in front of him. He felt a sharp pain across his face as some of them cut into his flesh. He felt a gush of blood from a cut on his forehead that obscured his vision. Blindly, he pointed his gun and fired until it was empty.

And then he saw, vaguely, the uniformed figure rushing up beside him.

"Shoot me!" he screamed.

But suddenly the firing stopped. He saw an arm raise, and the glint of a gun barrel coming down at his head.

Then consciousness left him in a blinding flash of light and pain . . .

"GEORGE BOLLATA, you are accused of the murder of three police officers. Before I ask you how you plead, whether guilty or not guilty, I must ask you if you are represented by your own attorney."

He heard the dull, flat voice of the judge. But he couldn't see him. His head was swathed in bandages. He didn't care. For nearly a week he had lain in the Bridewell hospital, awaiting his trial. At first he had lain amid the darkness of his bandages in frustrated fear. He had failed again. He had wanted to be shot. He had wanted to die. But they had taken him alive. And then, he knew that it really didn't matter. He had killed. There had been many witnesses to his murders. And that meant one thing to him: Death in the electric chair. Death.

"I want no attorney, your honor," he said quietly.

Behind him he could hear the rustling of feet from spectators in the courtroom. He could also hear the dull echoing of the stenograph machine, taking down every word. He heard the judge clear his throat.

"Then it is the duty of the court to appoint a public defender for you. Counsellor, are you ready to proceed for the defense?"

He heard a man walk close beside him, and then heard a voice say: "Your honor, I haven't had time to talk to the defendant before entering a plea. I—"

Bollata's voice cut in sharply: "Judge, I don't want to waste your time or anybody else's. I plead guilty and waive a jury trial."

Beside him, Bollata heard his attorney clear his throat. "If it please your honor, the defense has no objection to this entry of a guilty plea, but—"

"Do I understand you correctly, Counsellor?" the judge cut in. "You realize this makes the death penalty as requested by the state, mandatory."

Bollata smiled under his bandages at the judge's words. That's what he had been waiting to hear. There was no way out. And even the attorney appointed by the court knew it was hopeless. It was funny about that attorney, he thought. His voice. He was sure he had heard it somewhere.

"As I was about to say, your honor, the defense does not object to a plea of guilty, but does so on the grounds of insanity at the time of the crime. And the defense requests a psychiatric examination before the court passes sentence. The defense also has in court the defendant's own physician, Dr. Hugo Gorson, to present evidence in the case. We request examination in chambers, if the court pleases."

Bollata clenched his teeth harshly. Then he shouted: "I don't need any examination, Judge! I've pleaded guilty as charged! I demand to be sentenced in accordance with the law!"

The judge rapped his gavel. "The defendant will refrain from these outbursts. And the court sees no reason

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to object to the defense's request. We will adjourn to my chambers. . . Bailiff, instruct the court psychiatrist at once."

Bollata was aware of a general murmuring around him as the court adjourned. But he was unaware of most of the clamor. He was thinking about the attorney. His attorney. That voice . . .

He was seated in a comfortable chair. It was quiet in the room. But he knew there were others sitting around him even though he couldn't see them. Then he heard the voice of the judge.

"You may proceed with the examination Counsellor."

The voice of Bollata's attorney came smoothly, evenly, with assurance.

"Your honor, the defendant is afflicted with a malignant brain tumor. He has had two brain surgeries performed in the past twenty years by Dr. Hugo Gorson, who is present now to substantiate the defendant's case. Dr. Gorson, will you explain to the court what effect this tumor has had upon the defendant?"

Bollata felt a cold chill run through him as the voice of his attorney came to him. And worse, he suddenly felt a foreboding. Deep amid the pressure inside his skull he seemed to hear a laugh. A deep, abysmal laughter.

"What the Counsellor has said is correct, your honor. The defendant is afflicted with a malignant brain tumor. A tumor of this type, where it is located, very often leads to dementia."

The voice of the judge cut in. "What sort of dementia, doctor?"

Gorson's voice came again. "It may take many forms. In the case of George Bollata, I would say the dementia was homicidal in character."

Bollata knew he had to stop this. If this kept up he would beat the murder charge. And he couldn't let that happen. He had to die. He had to!

HE TRIED to speak. But somehow, his voice wouldn't come. The words were there. But his voice would not say them. It was as if some evil hand had closed around his throat. His head roared. The pressure grew and grew. And along with it, the laughter.

"If it please your honor," Bollata heard his attorney say, "I will turn the defendant over to the court psychiatrist now to substantiate the claim of the defense."

Bollata tried again to speak but he couldn't. Then he heard another voice. This time the court doctor.

"What is your name?"

Bollata gripped the sides of his chair. Now was the time. Now was his chance. He would show them.

"My name is George Bollata," he said.

"Where were you born?"

This was it. He could lie his way through. They weren't so smart. "I was born in Chi—" His voice stopped. And then words formed in his throat. Words that he didn't want to say. Words that were the truth. It was as if some evil force were guiding him, compelling him. "—in *London!*"

"When were you born?"

"In 19—" Again his voice stopped. Again the words slipped away and others took their place. "—in 1647."

He could hear a murmur of voices around him. Sweat broke out on his forehead. Deep within his head came the laughter again.

"How old are you?"

He ran his tongue over his lips. "I am thirty—" Again his voice stopped. Then words slipped out in a harsh rapidity. "I am three hundred years old."

Then he screamed. He screamed at the top of his lungs. "No! You fiend! You can't force me to say the truth!

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I won't! I pleaded guilty I demand the death penalty!"

He felt arms grab him. And he heard the Judge's voice over the turmoil of others. "If the State and the Defense are in agreement, I believe sentence can now be passed. Court will reconvene."

* * *

His arms were held as he stood before the bar. Behind the bandages his head swelled and throbbed. Over and over in his mind he thought: *"They'll have to electrocute me! They can't release me on the grounds of a brain tumor! I won't live a thousand years! I've beaten the devil! He can't win! I'll die I'll die—I'll die!*

"George Bollata," the voice of the Judge came dully. "You have pleaded guilty to murder in the first degree. I wish it were within my power to sentence you to the electric chair, but because of the evidence presented by your defense attorney, and substantiated by the court physician, I cannot exact the death penalty. But I hereby sentence you to the solitary confinment of a psychopathic institution for the rest of your life."

He heard the sentence and he trembled. Then he wrenched his arms from the men holding him and tore the bandages from his face.

Light flooded into his eyes. He saw the courtroom, the judge, the police officers standing beside him.

And he saw something else. He saw a fat smiling man bowing to the Judge. And then the fat man turned to him and he gazed into a pair of deep-set cold eyes.

His mind screamed. *A thousand years!*

And the fat face smiled at him and the deep-set eyes glared coldly.

And George Bollata shouted at the fat man.

"Mephisto! It *was* your voice! *You* were my attorney! *You* did this to me!"

And the devil laughed . . .

HERBS FOR WHAT AILS YOU

By FRAN FERRIS

HERBS have always been used in the kitchen, but years ago they were associated with superstition and folk-medicine. Gardening books were full of their uses. Mint, probably because of its refreshing odor, was good to make you remember things long forgotten. Rue helped to preserve the eyesight, but sage preserved the whole human race. Nevertheless, people that grew sage in their gardens died like anyone else. This one item always puzzled the ancients. They could cope with anything else; falling hair, fickleness, sea dragons, melancholia, nightmares, or most any ailment you could mention.

To awaken those who doze or sleep too soundly you should make a brew for inhaling made of vinegar, rue seed, and partridge feathers, and old shoe soles. Or you could place the head of a bat on the sleeper's right shoulder. Evidently just shaking the old guy out of his slumbers would be too easy. In those days they liked to fuss and naturally perfume made from old shoe soles or the head of a bat on the shoulder would be enough to awaken anyone.

The treatment of melancholia was no problem for the herb doctor who prescribed a combination of thyme, sweet balm, clary or borage steeped in wine. Naturally after several glasses of this hot wine the melancholy one would become merry and high as a kite. The next day the herb doctor would prescribe this follow-up to combat the hang-over: a poultice made of wild thyme, maiden hair, and roses.

One book on plant lore states that hanging a bunch of onions over the door will absorb all the contagious diseases of those who come and go. A paste spread on rue leaves made of walnuts and figs could be eaten to insure protection from plagues, pestilence, and poisons.

Pliny wrote a great deal about plant life in

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his great book of "Naturall Historie." But he was such an indoor and bookish man that he considered even a walk in the park a waste of time. No wonder he had such crazy ideas about herbs. He probably never saw one. Nevertheless he wrote that rue would grow best if it was stolen from the neighbor's garden, and basil would thrive if sown with a great deal of cursing.

Pliny mentions the case of one sad sack who got a scorpion in his brain just by smelling of basil too often. It gave him so much pain that it caused his death. And all this just by smelling the stuff. Pliny also states that whoever wears a branch of Pennyroyal in each ear shall never get too warm although he may be in the hot sun all day. Then he went on to say that if a man carried some camomile in a wooden box around with him, he would be invisible. I suppose that if you combined these two treatments you could go around unnoticed while keeping cool by means of the foliage in your ears. At least it would save a lot of embarrassment.

A blade of grass stolen from a churchyard at night could cure a toothache, according to one ancient idea, but that was too simple for old Pliny. He said that you should bite pieces of wood off some old tree that has been struck by lightning, while on your knees with your hands clasped behind your back. Pliny goes on to say that for a sore throat you should find a bird's nest and boil it in white wine along with oil of camomile and sweet almonds. You make a poultice of this mess and apply it to the sore throat. Who wouldn't rather have the sore throat?

BRAVEHEARTED men were instructed to eat catnip to bolster up their courage. According to Hoffman the most gentle person would become fierce and quarrelsome if he chewed up the root of catnip. The gladiators mixed fennel with their food. In the days of chivalry, thyme was the symbol of activity. So the knights in armor would rattle into battle with a scarf about their neck on which their lady fair had embroidered the figure of a bee hovering over a spray of thyme. During the Greek wars, a pack of parsley-laden mules threw panic into a group of soldiers because this herb was used to strew over graves. To be in need of parsley meant to be at the point of death. Militarists used to believe that gunflint boiled in verbena and rue would be sure to hit the mark.

And then of course there were beauty aids made of herbs. Wormwood leaf ashes mixed with oil of roses would make the hair black. Sage was used as a dentifrice. A bald head was a great source of worry then as it is today, but rubbing a juicy onion on the bald pate was supposed to fix things up. An onion mixed with honey and salt and hen's grease was just the thing to remove red and blue spots from the complexion.

Herbs were also used in matters of the heart. One thing a girl could do to insure herself of the love of the opposite sex, was to make a love potion which would consist of a certain number of red and white rose leaves and for-get-me-nots, boiled in 385 drops of water for three and three-quarters minutes. Then she would put three drops of this mixture into her desired one's drink, and just like that, she'd get her man. In such a frustrated state, a girl might easily make a mistake in her exacting recipe, so it would have been much simpler to stick to the old procedure of enticing the object of her affection to accept a sprig of basil from her hand. Or she could slip a piece of southernwood in her shoe, or down the front of her dress. Then the first man that she would meet would be the one that she would marry. If the girl wanted to know the name of the man she was going to marry, she would give names to several onions and line them up on the chimney. The onion that sprouted first would bear the name of her prospective husband.

* * *

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The CAT-SNAKE

by FRANCES M. DEEGAN

Isabel couldn't be blamed for her pets—for she was a part of them . . .

MY FRIEND, George Bendler, broke his leg . . .

I don't know how else to start. I've been sitting here trying to think of an opening sentence that would convey some hint of the events that were to follow. I can't think of any, because actually there was no hint. Dr. Devore told me to sit down and write it in my own words, so . . .

My friend, George Bendler, broke his leg.

He called me on the evening of Wednesday, March 19th. I was puttering at my book on "The Idiosyncrasies of Time" and welcomed the interruption.

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The smoke was increasing rapidly in volume, and I staggered back aghast at the horrendous sight before me . . .

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He said, "Harry, I broke my leg."

I said, "Fine! I'll be right over. What kind of liquor do you want me to bring? I haven't sat up with a sick friend since last Saturday."

"Listen, you clown!" George said. "I'm suffering. I'm laid up for days—maybe for weeks. You've got to meet a train. It's Isabel. She just won a scholarship at the Club Frivole for being the best acrobatic dancer in Suterville. You'll have to take care of her. She's awfully shy, and I'm—"

"You're shy, too, chum," I said. "A couple, three screws. What started you on this binge?"

"Binge be damned!" George croaked. "I'm lying here all plastered up with a trained nurse. I'm going to sleep in five minutes."

Sure enough I could hear some woman yammering.

"Don't be silly," I said. "This is no time to go to sleep."

"I have to! She said so," George yelped. "She gave me a shot, and she's getting mad. She—"

"Mr. Crown?" said a harsh female voice. "This is Mrs. Feeny. I can't let George talk to you if you're going to upset him like this. He is still suffering from shock and possible concussion. He fell down a flight of concrete stairs this afternoon, and his leg has just been put into a cast. In his present condition any excitement will be extremely harmful."

"Oh," I said. "Oh. Well that's different. What's he trying to say?"

"If you'll promise not to antagonize him," she grated, "I'll let him tell you."

"Well, okay," I said. "But I can't help it if he doesn't make sense."

"Hello," said George hollowly.

"You have my sympathy, friend," I said. "They must have been fresh out of glamour girls when they sent for her."

"NEVER mind that," George muttered. "It's Isabel I'm worried about. She gets in at 9:10 tomorrow morning and she's never been in Chicago before. She'll be scared."

"Who is this timid belle?" I asked. "And how did she get mixed up with a hot spot like the Frivole? If you know what we're talking about?"

"I'm just as surprised as you are," said George senselessly. I wasn't surprised yet. I was still floundering around trying to cope with his sick mind. "Isabel is my kid sister—stepsister. I haven't seen her for ten years, but she was always a queer little kid. Awfully shy and—not backward, but different some way."

"Okay," I said patiently. "And she pops off a train at 9:10 tomorrow morning, and you want me to meet her. Where do you want me to put her?"

"They got a suite for her at the Blake Hotel," George mumbled. "But you'll have to stay with her, Harry. People scare her to death, especially strangers."

"I'm people," I said reasonably. "Likewise a stranger. How do you think she'll react when I try to snare her at the station and bear her off to a mysterious suite at the Blake?"

"She'll be all right with you, Harry, because you're a friend of mine. Take good care of her . . ."

"That's all," said a husky whisper. "The poor boy is dozing off now."

I said, "Listen! If this is a gag—"

"Sh-h. We mustn't disturb him. You heard what he said. You're to meet his little sister tomorrow morning and take her to the Blake Hotel. Goodnight, Mr. Crown."

I had a drink. Then I had another drink. I wondered what had made George fall downstairs when he was supposed to meet his little sister Isabel.

I called the Blake, and there was a

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reservation for a Miss Isabel Bendler who was arriving at 9:10 A.M. at Union Station.

I called the Club Frivole and talked to Martin Berne, the manager, and there was a feature spot in the show for a Miss Isabel Bendler, to be billed as Nila, Descendant of Egyptian Kings.

I hung up and thought about it, and had a bright idea.

It was entirely possible that in ten years a kid sister who was neither backward nor forward might develop into something interesting. Otherwise how would she rate a feature spot at the Club Frivole—as an Egyptian princess, at that?

I WAS up bright and early on Thursday morning. I arrived at Union Station with plenty of time to spare, the train from Suterville was on schedule, and the passengers duly de-trained and went on their individual ways. Nobody lingered, male or female, looking as if he or she expected to be met. I chased a conductor who was in a hurry, and asked him about the Bendler belle from Suterville.

He started to get out his list of passengers, and then stopped and looked at me. "Oh," he said. "You mean the snake woman. She's back in the baggage car. You better go and get her."

Fortunately I had gone temperately to bed the night before. The thought of snakes didn't terrify me much. I went back to the baggage car.

She was up on a baggage truck, sitting on top of a big box. She looked wild. She looked like something out of the deep woods that had wandered into town by mistake. And not only that. There was a big red setter in the open door of the baggage car. An elderly man had him on a leash, and he was hanging on for dear life. The man was mad, but his dog was furious, he was in the last stages of hysterical fury, and his bark was thin and cracked like a worn-out record. His frenzied paws kept trying to launch him at the baggage truck.

A baggage man was waving his arms and yelling, "You'll just have to wait a minute, Mister! We'll bring up another truck—"

"This dog is ruined!" the man roared. "I've got to get him to a hospital immediately. You've destroyed a champion, do you hear? I'll sue the road! I'll—"

"Let's go," said the baggage man wearily. He signalled to an assistant, who began to haul the half-filled baggage truck toward the station.

"Out of the way, there, you!" the baggage man barked at me. "Hey! Get off there, you fool!" He started running after the truck as I vaulted up.

"Shut up!" I yelled back. "I'm in charge of this—"

The man in the baggage car was still roaring, and his dog was still barking. A station policeman and several other people were coming toward us to investigate the uproar.

I waved my arm at the policeman, and said, "Little trouble back there, officer. You better see about it."

The baggage assistant was walking backwards, so he could see what went on. I said, "Turn around there, Charlie, and let's get this thing rolling." I held up my wallet and let him see me take out a bill. He turned around and got rolling.

Isabel looked at me with wild green eyes. She had dun color hair pulled back in a knot, and she was dressed like a dummy in a second hand store. A brown skirt that came well below her knees, even when sitting down, a shapeless brown coat, a mannish felt hat, and ground-gripper oxfords.

I said, "I'm Harry Crown, Isabel.

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George had an accident yesterday. He broke his leg. He sent me down to get you."

She just looked at me with those fixed green eyes.

"I'm a friend of George's," I said. "He told me to take care of you."

Nothing happened. Not a flicker of expression. Not a sound out of her. It wasn't irritating, it was eerie. I decided to ignore her. I turned my back and watched where the truck was going.

We got her through the baggage room all right. The baggage check was attached to the big box, not to her, and the box had to go along with us. She made that plain without saying anything.

I DON'T know how she got down off the truck. I wasn't watching. All at once she was standing beside the truck and the assistant baggage smasher had a queer look on his face.

She pulled the stub of the baggage check out of her pocket and put it down on the edge of the truck. He picked it up and handed it to the man behind the counter, and wrestled the box off the truck. I slipped him a dollar. He didn't thank me. He looked dazed.

A cab driver helped me move the box out to his cab, and Isabel went right along with the box. The top of it was fastened with a padlock, and there were small holes drilled here and there in the sides. After a while I began to notice a funny smell in the cab. It was a musty, unfamiliar odor, and although it was not very strong, I decided that it was definitely unpleasant. I told the driver to go around to the service entrance of the Blake.

The suite was nice. Sitting room, bedroom and bath, facing the lake. It was furnished with conservative taste, nothing modernistic. The large sitting room had a real fireplace with a small fire burning cozily. There were flowers, roses and tulips, attractively arranged in both rooms.

The lake was gunmetal gray with small whitecaps marching in to batter the ice-sheathed shore. There was nothing else to see, just an unlimited expanse of gray water blurring into a gray sky somewhere in the distance.

Isabel stood at a sitting room window looking at it for a long time. The box was beside her. I sat near the fire and smoked and waited, and wondered. I didn't time her, but she must have stood there without moving for at least thirty minutes.

I said, "Isabel. Take off your hat and coat and sit down. Are you hungry?"

She didn't move.

I said, "If you want to be alone, just say so. But you don't have to be afraid of me."

She turned around then and came toward me, and for the first time I was struck with her rippling grace, a continuous flow of movement that was completely out of place under those dowdy clothes.

She paused in the middle of the room, and stared at me glassy-eyed. She lifted her head a little and her nostrils quivered. I didn't move. She looked like she was ready to scamper up the curtains if I so much as lifted a hand.

I thought, this is ridiculous! George ought to be horsewhipped for letting her come here. George, and whoever booked her into the Club Frivole.

My next thought brought a rush of sympathy for her. The owner of the Frivole was a smart operator. Denny Kean had never been known to buy a pig in a poke. He must have been fully aware of what he was doing when he signed Isabel up for a feature spot, so there was only one answer. Comedy.

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They were going to shove the poor kid out on the floor under the merciless lights, and let her flutter around and break her heart—for laughs!

She must have recognized the sympathy in my face. Her lids drooped until her eyes were sleepy slits, and her wariness relaxed. When she spoke, her light voice had a faint humming vibration.

She said, "Will you stay with me?"

"Yes, sure," I said carefully. "I'll stay as long as you need me."

She inclined her head gently, and was gone with that undulating rhythm that was totally incongruous in those clothes.

I THOUGHT she had gone into the bedroom to hang up her hat and coat, and I congratulated myself on my tactful handling of the situation. She was gone quite a while, and in the meantime the porter called from downstairs, and said he had Miss Bendler's baggage.

It was the first time I had thought of it, and I asked him where he had got it. It seemed her things had been checked at Suterville, and the claim stubs mailed to the hotel. Whoever had shipped Isabel and her baggage had known better than to let her handle it herself. It made me madder than ever. It made the whole thing look like a dirty put-up job, and I decided to do something about it. My decision was considerably reinforced when I put down the phone and turned around.

She had come back into the room and stood there watching me with those eyes. She had let down her long hair, and was wearing nothing but a bath towel.

I don't remember what I did—gasped, probably. Anyway it frightened her and she started running, in the wrong direction. She was headed for the hall door, and I had no choice. I tackled her and brought her down with only inches to spare.

She snarled and writhed and clawed until I clipped her on the ear. Then she tried to bite, and I had to get rough. I knew a bellhop would be up any minute with her luggage. It was no time to be gentle. I got a grip on both arms and yanked her to her feet. She wailed like a lost banshee, and I shoved her into the bedroom and slammed and locked the door. She could turn the bolt on her side too, but I wasn't worried about that at the moment.

I was shaking and sweating and having cold chills all at the same time. I tried to light a cigarette, and my hands jerked so violently I couldn't connect the match with the cigarette. I thought suddenly of the hall door in the bedroom, and then realized it must still be locked.

The bellhop knocked and came in loaded down with an assortment of battered bags. He marched straight across to the bedroom.

"Here! I snapped. "Just put them down."

He dropped them in a heap in front of the bedroom door and went out fast, snagging a dollar bill as he passed me. I realized then that I must look a little unnatural. I did. I glanced into the mirror above the fireplace and saw a frenzied individual with his hair on end and his face scratched from ear to ear.

I went over and locked the hall door and came back to the fire. I wanted to bathe my bleeding face, but I sat down to calm myself before attempting to invade the bedroom in order to reach the sanctuary of the bath. The cushion behind me squirmed and began to slither up toward my neck. I yelled and leaped, and nearly fell into the fireplace.

The reptile slid smoothly up the back of the chair and draped itself there. The

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head lifted and it stared at me with obsidian eyes and stuck out its forked tongue. I thought of snake bite and tottered over to the phone. The operator said, "Oper-ator?" and I dropped the phone. I couldn't have a drink brought up with a snake charging around loose.

I looked across the room at the box, and twitched with fright. There was another one pouring itself over the side from under the lid. She had taken the padlock off when I wasn't looking. The situation required immediate action. I stamped to the bedroom door, threw the bolt, and flung it open.

SHE had been standing there with her face against the door, but I didn't knock her down. She was too quick on her feet. The bath towel was back in place, and she no longer looked wild. Her head tilted slowly to the side, and those green eyes widened and narrowed at me, widened and narrowed, as if to convey a message. Her lips were slightly parted, but no sound came out. The appeal was in her attitude, and in her eyes.

"Your snakes are loose!" I said hoarsely. "Go and put them back—every one of them!"

"N-n-o-o," she hummed ingratiatingly. She slid close to me and arched her neck, and moved her head from side to side so that it barely brushed my sleeve.

My hand went up involuntarily and stroked her hair. It was fine and soft, but very thick; and a queer thrill, half fear and half ecstasy, shocked my senses.

"You little devil!" I said thickly.

She twisted under my hand and ran into the sitting room. Her hands touched the mantel, and with one lithe surge of co-ordinated motion she was standing up there, reaching over the mirror and pulling down a snake that was headed for the ceiling. I shuddered as she wrapped it loosely about her neck, and the next instant I knew why the assistant baggage man at the station had looked dazed.

She dove off the mantel head first, landed on all fours, and bounced to her feet, all in one flash. The snake remained perfectly still, and she began to prowl about the room, examining everything.

"Will you please," I said, "pick up your pets and put them away?"

She kept on with her prowling and paid no attention to me.

"Isabel!" I shouted, and clapped my hands loudly.

She jumped like a raw nerve and slid her eyes around at me.

"Put those snakes in the box, and then get dressed!" I ordered. "You're going right back where you came from!"

She wailed like she had her tail caught in the door, and ran toward me. I jumped back and slammed the bedroom door. She scratched at it and squalled pitifully. I wondered how soon the management would institute an investigation.

"Get away from me with that poisonous viper!" I yelled. "If you don't put it down, I'll—I'll kill it!"

She went right on yowling.

"Isabel! Be quiet! I won't send you back, if you'll do as I tell you. Be a good girl now, and . . ."

There was silence, and she moved away from the door. I waited and heard faint rustlings. I opened the door cautiously.

She was crouching over the box, pawing in the straw that half filled it, and no longer wore the snake. I watched her pull a small black case out of the box and open it. She was on her feet suddenly in one effortless flow of motion, crossed the room, and held out

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the case to me.

I looked at the contents and then looked at her. Her eyes were eager now, and she continued to stand there, holding the case out to me.

"I see," I said, but of course I didn't. It meant something important to her, but I didn't know that. I reached for the case, and she let me have it.

The snakes were momentarily forgotten and I started forward into the sitting room, and then looked around warily. They were still enjoying their freedom. One was coiling itself around a fat vase of tulips, and the other occupied the armchair. I couldn't see any more. I glared at Isabel, and she made a little cooing trill and ran to the chair to stroke the serpent reposing there, as if to demonstrate its amiable disposition.

I KNEW as much as I cared to know about snakes, which was practically nothing, except that they crawled, coiled, and sometimes rattled and stung. The two now on view looked very similar, but I couldn't identify them. They were about four feet long and three inches in diameter, with iridescent scales in deep shades of blues and greens.

I said, "What are they? What kind of snakes?"

Isabel indicated the one she was stroking, and said, "Silissu." Then she glided over to the flower fancier, and said, "Sassisac. See?"

She was crouching in front of the box, and I knew that she was opening it . . .

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"Uh-huh," I said. "Silly Sue and Sassy Sack. That still doesn't tell me the antidote in case they get vicious. Let's go into the bedroom."

She wouldn't follow me until I had dragged her five shabby bags inside. She began opening them and piling junk on the floor. Books, dishes, a couple of clocks, an electric curling iron, kitchen cutlery, a hand mirror . . . the most outlandish assortment of props any feature dancer ever carried.

Out of the last bag she pulled a long green robe and slipped it over her head after dropping the bath towel. She wrapped various loose ends of the robe about her in strategic places, and made a final twist to fasten them. It was classically simple, and wickedly classic, but it suited her flowing movements. She picked up the little black plastic case again and brought it to me.

I set the case down on the bed and sat beside it to examine the contents. Isabel slithered around me and curled up on the other side of the bed.

The case was divided into three compartments, each with a separate lid. When the case was opened a spring released the inner lids simultaneously.

In the first compartment, bedded in silky fibers, was a large medallion, beautifully wrought in greenish metal and studded with blue and green gems. If they were genuine sapphires and emeralds, the thing was worth a small fortune. I touched it, but it was securely anchored.

The second compartment held six jewel-like containers, three green and three blue. Their facets glistened, but their contents were invisible.

In the third there was a green metal cylinder, its surface worked in an intricate design of cabalistic symbols. I lifted it out and it was surprisingly light. Isabel reached a supple arm and snared it out of my hands. She pressed a blue jewel near one end and the top flew up. There was a roll of green silk inside, and she pulled it out and handed it to me.

It was a scroll, but the material was neither paper nor parchment. It was a green silky tissue with a tensile strength to withstand the roughest handling. I unrolled it, and after several preliminary signs and symbols which meant nothing, I recognized a skillfully drawn chart of the heavens. I examined it from all angles and found nothing familiar about it. If the chart had been drawn from observation, it must have been observed at some distant time or place far remote from my own experience. Beneath the chart I encountered the totally incomprehensible text. It seemed to be made up of closely inscribed ideographs, unlike anything I had ever seen.

I looked at Isabel, and she was curled there watchfully, with her elbows pulled under her, and her head resting on her arms.

I said, "I can't read this. What is it?"

SHE pushed her palms against the bed and arched her torso in a feline stretch, then reached for a gleaming green container and held it out to me.

It looked like an expensive perfume bottle. I snatched it and pulled out the stopper. A thin wisp of smoke spiraled up. I tried to put the stopper back, and in my confusion dropped it and didn't see where it had gone.

I was watching the neck of the emerald bottle, and the smoke was increasing rapidly in volume and spreading layers of mist in the room. A sweet, piercing odor choked me and penetrated to my brain. I was getting drunk faster than any human capacity should permit. I'd have been terrified if I hadn't been so absorbed in my drunkenness.

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Isabel reached into the case and turned the medallion like the dial of a combination lock. She laughed gleefully. It was infectious. I laughed with her. We laughed and laughed. It was a joyous duet . . . until I heard the rumbling, like approaching thunder.

"Too cold to rain," I objected. "Quit thundering, will you?"

Isabel had slipped away in the murky room, and I clung to the bed dizzily, breathing the sweet, intoxicating fumes. An eerie terror struggled somewhere deep inside, but my drugged senses smothered it, and buried it in thick folds of Lethean fog.

"Isabel," I murmured. The thunder had stopped and I was alone in the fog.

I have no idea how long I lay there. Queer images were going through my brain, disconnected pictures that were accompanied by voices, and neither the pictures nor the voices made sense.

Gradually, I became aware that one of the voices was Isabel's. I recognized the childish lightness of tone with its humming vibration, and then I realized that all the voices had that musical quality.

Little by little Isabel's voice dominated the others, until they were merely a murmuring background. She was pleading with some one. That went on for quite a while, and finally she got an answer, and if I had been Isabel I wouldn't have enjoyed it. She was being told off with authority. A deep, mellow voice was passing judgment on her and it sounded rugged.

The murmuring voices rose mournfully and faded as the mellow tones began an oration of regret. Then I knew he was speaking to me. He was apologizing, not in words, but with the vibrant tones of his voice. I understood him perfectly.

"You understand me w e l l," he chanted. "You have an affinity for our race, and for that reason my misbegotten daughter took advantage of you. Contrary to natural laws, she has allowed you to acquire knowledge out of your time. She has done a reckless and foolish thing and you will be obliged to suffer for it, but so shall she. I tell you this because you have helped my wicked daughter pass through the time jog and the act has left a spiritual imprint which can never be effaced. Because she disobeyed instructions she became lost in time, and there was only one way to return to our world from where she was when the time jog occurred."

I MUST have asked a question without knowing it, because his humming voice rose in intensity and fixed my attention as he explained:

"You are unaware of the time jog which occurs at irregular intervals, and during which our race can pass through any era while time stands still. Actually time is jogged backward over a period of several hours, and then repeats itself and goes smoothly on. Everything that occurs during the first passage of those hours is wiped from memory, except in a few rare cases in which the same incidents are not repeated. These individuals imagine afterwards that they dreamed the experiences which actually occurred. If the experience is vivid, they are apt to become victims of some mental disorder."

Images of major catastrophes, of births and deaths, and other vital events went vaguely through my mind, and he answered:

"All those things are repeated during the time jog. When time jumps back, the occurrence as well as the memory is wiped out. In the future your people may learn to take advantage of it, just

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as we do. You will be able to project yourself into any era of the past or future, and learn much while time is suspended; but there is danger that you will be caught there, as my undutiful daughter was caught in your time cycle, and had to age and die, and wait for the next time jog. For us there is no death, except in our own time."

Another question drifted through my mind, and he answered:

"My time is far in the past, long before the great flood which destroyed our continent and all but scattered remnants of our culture which had been transplanted to other lands. We believe that our race has long since died out, but we continue to search for a trace of it. Some day modern man may uncover it, and then we shall try to rebuild our civilization in the future. Meanwhile, be assured that your suffering will be no worse than that of my foolish daughter."

Incoherent questions crowded my mind, but he was already intoning the recessional.

"Remember that time is a hard taskmaster," he chanted. "If you lose a few minutes, you must run all day and never quite catch up. If you are ahead of time, you must wait idly until time and its train of events arrive. May the Cat-Snake protect you . . ." The murmuring voices rose in a paean of sound. "And bring you long life and wisdom. . . ."

I HAD a terrific headache. It was like nothing I had ever suffered before. I reached for the thermos on the night stand and dragged it toward me. It slipped out of my fingers and crashed on the floor. I opened my eyes and light seared them with sharp pain. I rolled over slowly, with infinite care, and levered my head off the pillow. This time I opened my eyes gradually. The first thing I saw was the clock. It said Thursday, 10:25 a.m. There was something wrong about that, something that bothered me, but I couldn't remember what it was.

My head sank back on the pillow and I lay there suffering the tortures of the damned. Little by little memories began to seep into my consciousness. The first vague trickle increased and made way for what followed, until my mind was flooded with vivid remembrance.

My first voluntary thought was that I couldn't remember returning home. I raised myself on one elbow and looked around the room. My clothes were in a familiar heap on the floor. I looked at the clock again. It still said Thursday, but the time was now 11:15.

"I can't stand this," I said aloud. "I've got to get this straightened out."

I crawled out of bed and staggered down the hall to my living room, fell into a chair, and reached for the phone.

There was a quart whiskey bottle on the floor beside my pet armchair. It was nearly empty.

"I only had two drinks!" I muttered indignantly. I was sure of it. I had opened a fresh bottle, taken two drinks, and called the Blake Hotel.

I picked up the phone and called the Blake Hotel.

"Gimme the room clerk," I mumbled, and heard her answer briskly.

"Have you a Miss Isabel Bendler registered there?" I asked.

"Bendler? One moment, please." It didn't take her long. She came back with a convincing, "No, we have no one by that name registered."

"Have you got a reservation for her?"

"No, we have not."

"Sure you have! You had a reservation yesterday—or today—what day is today anyway?"

"This is Thursday, March twen-

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tieth," she said reprovingly.

"Well, she was supposed to arrive at 9:10 this morning from Suterville, and you had a—"

"I'm sorry, we have no reservation for Miss Isabel Bendler."

"Listen!" I said desperately. "Did you have any dreams last night?"

"I'm sorry, I can give you no information about Miss Isabel Bendler."

And that was that. It was too early to call the Club Frivole. I called George Bendler. A pleasant young voice answered.

She said, "Mr. Bendler is resting now. May I take a message?"

"Where's Mrs. Feeny?"

"Mrs. Feeny has left. She was on night duty."

"Where can I call her?"

"I'm afraid you can't. She took a plane this morning for the coast. She's going out there to be married."

"Mrs. Feeny is already married!"

"Widowed," said the amused young voice. "Is there anything I can do?"

"You can tell me where to get in touch with her."

"I'm sorry. I don't know her well. Perhaps Dr. Granger can tell you. Doctor will be here in about an hour."

"I'll be there, too," I said, "if my head doesn't explode on the way."

I LOOKED at the whiskey bottle, but decided it couldn't do me any good. The hangover I had bore no resemblance to the mild jitters I had previously experienced. I was shattered, mentally and physically. I should have gone back to bed.

Getting dressed required prodigious patience and fortitude. But there was one thing that strengthened my resolve to solve the mystery. My face was covered with scratches, and still smeared with dried blood.

I made it to George's apartment building in a taxi, reeled into his bedroom and collapsed in a chair. George was awake, Dr. Granger was there, and the day nurse was a blond honey, but I didn't care.

I said, "Where's Isabel?"

They looked at me and they looked at each other. Dr. Granger came over and examined my face. He said, "You look like you've had a hard night. Don't you think you'd better sleep it off?"

I said, "Where's Mrs. Feeny?"

"She left this morning," said Dr. Granger. "I can't give you her new address."

"Why not?"

"See here!" he said sternly. "What is it you want?"

"George," I said, "where's your stepsister? Where is Isabel?"

"He's drunk," said George a trifle enviously. "I haven't any sister, and he never saw Mrs. Feeny."

"I talked to her last night on the phone!" I said shrilly. "I talked to you too, and you told me to meet your stepsister at 9:10 yesterday morning and take her to the Blake Hotel. And I did! Snakes and all!"

"Oh, brother!" George murmured. "If you've got any of that stuff left, you better pour it down the drain and throw away the bottle."

"Just a minute," said Dr. Granger professionally. He tipped my head back and examined my eyes, and I squirmed with pain. "Mumph!" he said noncommitally. "Miss Bailey, the number three, double."

She went away and came back with a glass, half filled with water.

I said, "I'll drink the water, but I don't want any of your medicine. It won't do me any good."

I drank the water. It was bitter. I threw the glass at Miss Bailey and missed.

I was weak. I didn't have a chance.

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I woke up in Dr. Horatio Devore's sanitarium. He's very sympathetic. He doesn't call me a liar, or try to convince me I had a touch of delirium tremens and scratched myself. He thinks it goes deeper than that. He thinks I'm a psycho with delayed action, that I fooled the Army doctors and went to pieces a year after I was discharged. But I know he's wrong!

There is still a long road to travel before I can convince him, but in my own mind a number of questions have been answered. I know why Isabel was carrying that junk with her. She was taking artifacts of the present back into the past. I know that green scroll must have contained instructions for using the time jog. The medallion was a dial for tuning in her period of time. She needed a convoy through the time jog—somebody who would not have her locked up on sight—and I was elected.

As a result of her meddling, my unfinished book on "The Idiosyncrasies of Time" lies neglected. How can I work on a treatise purportedly dealing with immutable facts while I remember so vividly my hectic experience during the time jog? I am determined to solve that riddle, and have therefore taken up the study of psychiatry, with Dr. Devore's permission and encouragement.

It so happens that this institution is co-educational, and during one of my walks about the grounds I participated in a little incident which prompted my new study.

Two of the nurses were trying to deal with a recalcitrant patient. They were having no luck. She was defying them with angry catcalls, and they fully expected her to break her neck. She was up in a tree.

I said, "Isabel! Get down from there at once, or I'll tell your father!"

She got down and streaked for the women's quarters with the nurses galloping after her.

The Cat-Snake people have a subtle sense of justice.

THE END

SACRED CROCODILE

By PETE BOGG

THE crocodile was worshipped by the very early Egyptians. It was kept in a special lake and tamed and cared for by the priests who would open its mouth and feed it cake and honey, milk and meat. The sacred crocodiles wore golden earrings, bracelets on their paws, and crystals around their bodies. They were worshipped and treated royally all their lives and when they died, they were embalmed as carefully as the kings of that period, and buried in catacombs.

In some localities, snakes were worshipped. At Metelis, near Alexandria, a snake was kept in a tower and cared for by priests. They would give it a bowl of honey and cake every day.

In some cities, fish were sacred. They were not eaten, but were buried in cemeteries after being packed in ashes to preserve them. Bronze models of fish were used to adorn their public buildings.

VALHALLA

By J. R. MARKS

VALHALLA was the warriors' paradise built around the trunk of a tree Laeradbr. It was the hall of Odin, where Teutonic warriors killed in battle dwelt forever with their god. The stag Eikthyrmir browsed on the leaves of the tree. The tree was also food for the goat Heidbrun, from whose udder flowed an unlimited stream of mead which quenched the thirst of the warriors. There were five hundred and forty doors to Valhalla, capable of admitting eight hundred warriors at one time. The roof was made of shields of the illustrious dead, its leaves of their spear-shafts, and their swords and armor decorated the walls. On the western wall hung a huge stuffed wolf surmounted by an eagle. A short distance from Valhalla was the forest called Glasir. It was surrounded by a sacred wall, and the trees bore golden foliage. The mighty champions went forth every day to combat each other, and at night feasted on wild boar and mead.

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APPLES OF THE GODS

By CARTER T. WAINWRIGHT

ACCORDING to ancient Greek mythology, there once lived a hero named Heracles. He was a son of Zeus, big, unscrupulous, and powerful. The worshippers uttered curses while making offerings to him, because they knew he enjoyed vulgarity. But he was a goodhearted fellow, for he had freed Prometheus from the punishment that the gods had given him for showing mortals about fire. Heracles always hated snakes and could kill the most deadly reptiles. According to the legend, when he was just a baby he strangled two snakes that were in his bed. When he was a young man he set out after the golden apples of Hesperides, which Zeus had given his wife for a wedding present. The tree of the golden apples was guarded by a dragon with a hundred heads, but Heracles had no great trouble in killing the monster and obtaining the apples.

Zeus had given his wife, Hera, a golden apple tree because an apple is a symbol of love, sacred of Venus. Many years ago the earth was overpopulated and Zeus decided that a war would be just the thing to get rid of some of the surplus. In order to start a war, he saw to it that lovely Helen was born, then he offered a golden apple to the fairest of all the goddesses. Hera, Athene, and Aphrodite (Venus) were the contestants. They could come to no agreement so Zeus said it would be left up to Paris to decide who was the most beautiful and award the apple. Bribery was the custom in early times too. Athene offered a victory in war if Paris would choose her. Hera offered a throne if the judge would decide in her favor. But Venus offered him Helen. Naturally he awarded the prize to the goddess of love, and took the beautiful Helen away from her husband. This was the beginning of the great Trojan war.

THE SCOTTISH FESTIVAL OF BEALLTAINN

By SANDY MILLER

THE Scottish Festival of Bealltainn held on May Day was the celebration of a pagan festival for the church. It lasted till two generations ago. In the Parish of Callander, on the first of May, all the boys in the town met on the moors. They cut a large, round table on the green sod, large enough for all. They made a fire and cooked a custard of eggs and milk. Then they made a cake which they baked on a stone. They broke the cake up in portions for each of them, one of the pieces was blackened all over with charcoal. They placed all these portions in a bonnet, and each person was blindfolded and drew a bit of cake from the bonnet. The one that drew the blackened piece was the one to be sacrificed to Baal, whose favor they seek to render the coming year productive. In earliest times the unfortunate one that drew the blackened bit of cake was burned to death, but later he had to jump through the flame three times.

In other localities in Scotland, Bealltainn was observed in different ways. In one rural community, they cut a square trench in the ground, leaving the turf in the middle. On this turf they built a fire, and cooked a caudle of eggs, milk, oatmeal, and butter. Besides this food, they had plenty of beer and whiskey. It was a pot-luck affair. To begin the ceremony, a bit of the caudle was poured out on the ground as a libation. Each one then took a cake of oatmeal which had nine knobs, each knob dedicated to some particular being who had the power to preserve their herds or destroy them. Each person then turned his face to the fire, broke off a knob, and flung it over his shoulder saying, "this I give to thee," naming the god whom he thanks, "preserver of my sheep," etc. Or he might address a destroyer saying, "this I give to thee, please spare my lambs." After this ceremony, they all eat, drink, and make merry.

This Bealltainn ceremony was a survival of human sacrifice to animalistic spirits. Later animals were sacrificed instead of the human victim. The Druids used to build fires on hilltops, and drove their livestock through them, using ceremonies to expiate for the sins of the people. A later reason for driving cattle through fire was not as a sacrifice but to keep them free of contagious diseases for the coming year.

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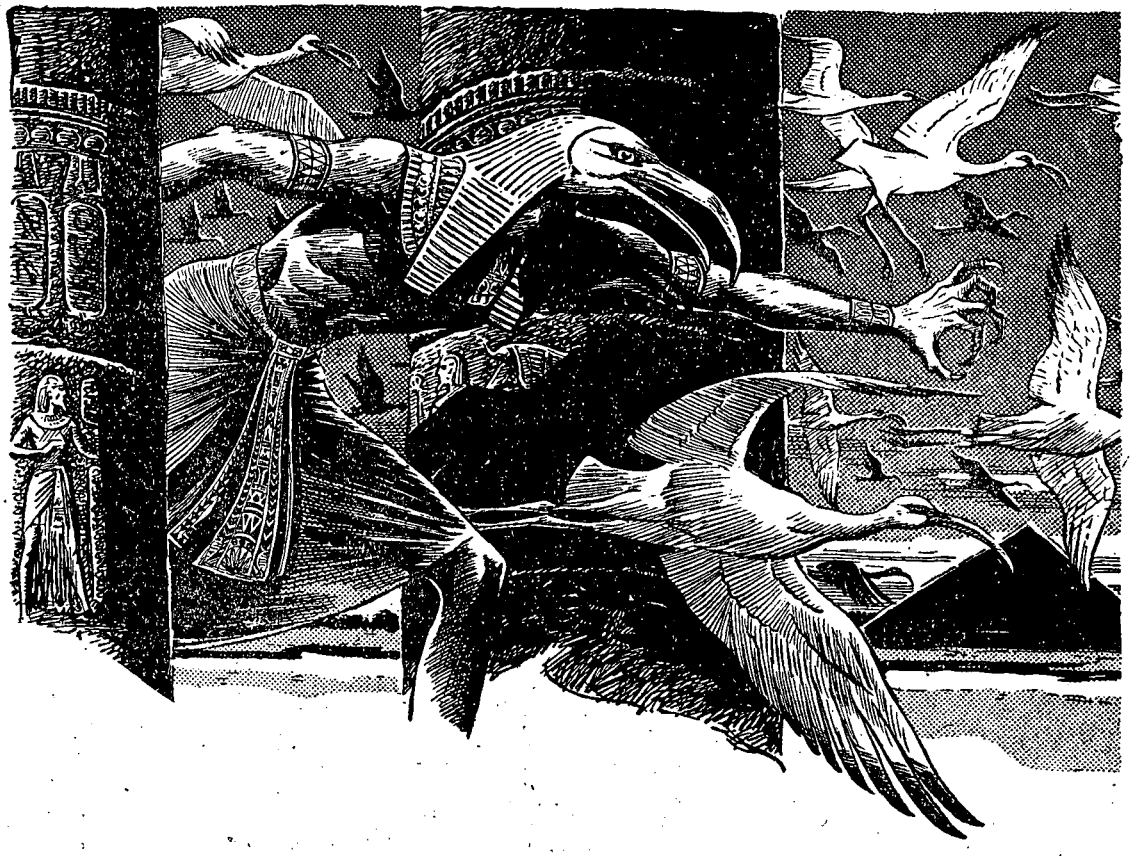

From out of the forgotten past of once mighty Egypt came an evil curse—and with it the dread symbol of Ibis . . .

THIS MORNING I went out into the field with my daughter and as the full blast of the sun's rays hit me I shivered.

"Why are you cold, Daddy?" she asked. "The sun is so nice and warm!"

What could I say to her? That from now until the day I die those same rays that to her seem so warm and cheerful will to me be a source of darkest fear?

Could I say that the dank vault of the forgotten past has opened and that the fetid breath of the thing which is Death within Life still surrounds us?

I might have said: "Darling little Anna, you are only four years old and your hair is gold and curly, and in your dancing blue eyes there is no fear. But as you grow older there will be times when those eyes will be doubtful. Memories which should have been severed with the umbilical cord that bound you to your mother will return; and though you will doubt those memories you will not be able to banish them."

How foolish! What could that mean to a four year old child?

Or suppose I had said: "No, destiny is not blind. There is a force that directs us: we may travel willingly or unwillingly, knowing or unknowing,

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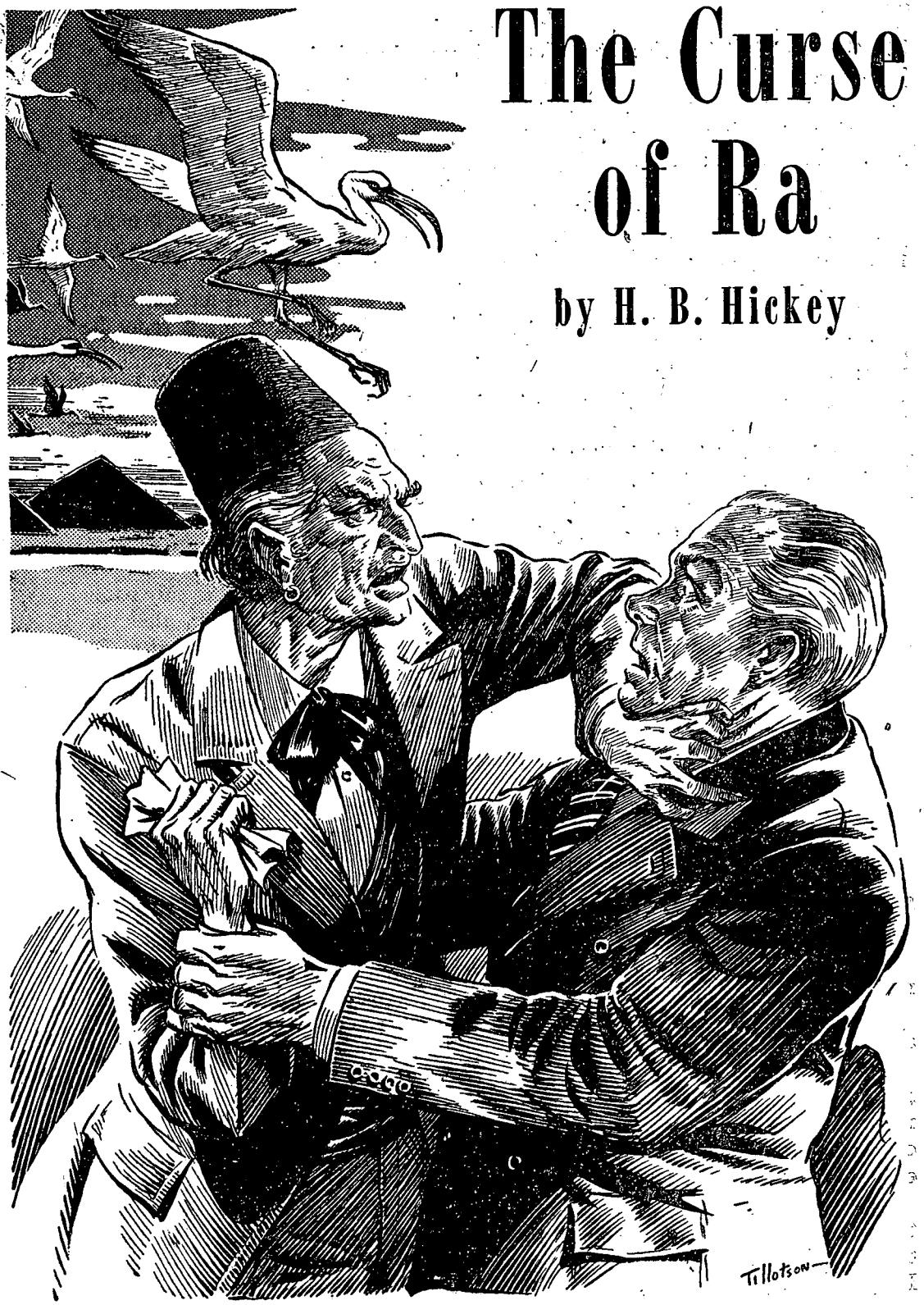
The Curse of Ra

by H. B. Hickey



The Egyptian's long arm swung out and the talons at the end of it raked Gorman's throat . . .

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but the road is laid out and the end is foredoomed."

Those are things which a man can hardly say to other grown men. And he would say them at the risk of being thought a lunatic.

I had pushed everything but the hint of that dark fear from my mind. When I wrote the report which brought James Vernor a posthumous Nobel Prize it was a coldly scientific report. I reported his discoveries for what they were: monumental additions to our knowledge of ancient Egyptian mythology.

Mythology! I tried to believe that, tried to believe that Pta-hotep was but the forerunner of later and better known story tellers. I almost *did* believe it.

But yesterday I saw Meyerson.

WHEN the call came from the sanitarium I didn't want to go. For years now I have been a farmer. I almost succeeded in becoming one of those solid, practical men who sees what he sees and knows what he knows, and no foolishness about it. You put seeds in the ground and the rains come and the sun shines and the seeds sprout, and that's enough for any man.

But the older Anna had something to say:

"You'll have to go, George. Meyerson may have saved our lives that day. According to the doctor this may be the chance to save Meyerson's life, to make him whole again."

So I went to see Meyerson. I put on my only suit and washed as much of the imbedded grime off my hands as I could and I drove the hundred and fifty miles to the sanitarium.

"It's very good of you to come," the man in the white coat said.

"Not at all. I realize that even the most tenuous connection with past reality may be sufficient to bridge the gap."

The doctor stared at me. I couldn't blame him. The discrepancy between my appearance and my speech is great.

"I thought Meyerson had been given up," I went on. "It seems in the nature of a minor miracle that you've brought him to the point where any hope could be entertained."

He was still staring at me but when he saw I was waiting for a reply he snapped out of his revery.

"Oh, yes. Well, electric shocks, you know. We're not certain just how they work or just why they work in some cases and not in others. In Meyerson's case they seem to have had a halfway effect."

"And you're hoping that the sight of me may finish the job?"

"Yes. Yours has been the only name he's spoken so we may assume that you are in some way connected with the cause of his illness. I suggest you let him talk if he feels like it. Talking may bring his fear out into the open where we can examine it."

"Suppose it's not the kind of fear which can be approached rationally?"

"What? How do you mean?"

I wasn't going to explain. It would only have confused him.

"Or suppose," I went on, "that instead of helping Meyerson, talking to me brings back his fear stronger than ever? Suppose it produces a relapse?"

"That is a chance we'll have to take."

He was quite cool about the thing. Why not? It was just another case to him. Not that he was uninterested in Meyerson. Quite the contrary. I was certain that he had done and would do everything within his power to help Meyerson recover. It was simply that he operates on one side of the fence. What I could have told him is on the other side, the dark side.

"I'm ready to see him," I said.

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He nodded and led me to a door at the back of his cheerful, homelike office. As I stepped through into the corridor the doctor stopped me.

"One thing more. You haven't seen Meyerson in some years. He has changed a good deal. Please do not show any surprise at his appearance or at anything he says. Be matter of fact and friendly."

"Of course."

We walked down that long corridor with its rooms on both sides. Some of the rooms had tiny doors with only a small, barred opening. The whole place had a clean and efficient appearance. We stopped before one of the small doors and the doctor unlocked it.

"You'd better go in alone. He may feel more comfortable with just you there." Then he added: "It's not dangerous."

THEN the door swung shut behind me and I was in the room. And the doctor was right; there was no danger.

The last time I had seen Meyerson he had stood at least six feet tall and must have weighed close to two hundred pounds. He was then about thirty-five years old.

Now—

Fear and horror had shrunk and shrivelled him. A small clump of damp gray hair lay uncombed on his damp and bony skull. He had been kept physically clean but it was a surgical cleanliness, not human. Meyerson was beyond that.

"Hello, Meyerson," I said inanely. "Remember me? I'm Dick Enderly."

He remembered me. His half open mouth worked strangely and his watery and bulging eyes blinked. He pulled up slightly from his fearful crouch in the corner of the cot that was against the wall.

"Enderly. D i c k Enderly," he croaked.

His voice had not been used in years except for purely animal sounds. Probably my name was the first he had uttered in all those years. He said it over and over.

"That's right," I said.

It made no impression on Meyerson. He kept repeating it. But as he went on and on and on his voice gained strength. Then suddenly he was off the cot and his thin, birdlike hands were on my shoulders. I wanted to run and could not. Like claws those hands perched on my shoulders.

"You were there, Enderly. You were there," he croaked.

"Yes, I was there."

Spittle ran down Meyerson's chin and the horror was in his eyes.

"I didn't really hear it. I didn't. Did I?"

"What?"

"The wings beating! But you weren't in the room? Were you?"

"Yes. I was in the room with you," I lied. "What about the wings?"

"They were beating! Flying! Fighting! Feet of birds scratching on the floor. In the darkness there were wings!"

"No," I said. "There were no wings."

"There weren't?"

"No."

"Then I only dreamed it! I must have dreamed it!"

"Yes. You dreamed it."

There was no more to say. Meyerson was going to be all right, as all right as he could ever be. He was sitting on the cot and crying. I didn't say goodbye.

He will finish his existence in that place because he can never again care for himself. But Meyerson will be all right. I lied to him and saved him. But how about myself? I can't lie to myself.

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Now I know that Pta-hotep was right. Now I know for certain what happened in that locked room. Because I thought I knew I gave up my career and became a farmer. But now I am certain!

Pta-hotep wrote his account in the days before Egypt became great, before the pyramids, when the Sahara was yet green. This is the end of the story, as it happened in our time . . .

IT WAS a tall man who pushed open the door and entered the offices of the Greater Nile Export-Import Company. He was thin and walked with a slight stoop. His hair was black except for a silver streak at each temple, and his skin was dark and with an underlying pallor. His black eyes were large, luminous, and vague.

"You wish to see someone?" the girl at the desk asked.

"Yaiss," he said. But he sounded doubtful.

"*Whom* is it you wish to see?" she asked carefully.

"I—I am not sure."

"Well," she hesitated, "would Mr. Gorman be all right?"

"Yaiss." He drew the word out as though not certain it was the right one.

"And *whom* shall I say is calling?"

"Amen-ankh—" He hesitated, shook his head. "No. That is not right. Fesir Hamid."

Mr. Gorman came bustling out of his office. He was short, pudgy, and well groomed. His small plump hand shook the taller man's long bony one.

"Mr. Hamid. Won't you come into my office?"

"Thank you."

When they were seated in Gorman's comfortable office he allowed his cheerful eyes a moment's study of the dark man. But the silence was uncomfortable.

"Hamid, eh? We may assume you are an Egyptian then," Gorman said.

"Yaiss."

"And you have some business with Greater Nile?"

"I—I don't know."

"Eh? You don't know?"

"I am sorry. This is very strange."

"Yes, I should say it is. Are you sure you're in the right place?"

"Yaiss. That is, I think so." He saw that Gorman was growing impatient and stretched out an imploring hand.

"Please. It is as strange for me as for you. I am told to come here. Yet I cannot know why."

"Told? You mean a business acquaintance sent you?" Gorman sought common ground.

"No. I was told inside. Inside here." Hamid pointed to his head.

"Eh?"

"Yaiss. No, I am not insane. It is not a voice which tells me. I don't know. Maybe I am. But it is something inside me which does it, something which seems to reach me from far back. When I was a child, maybe? Maybe as far as that?"

"I'm sure I wouldn't know," Gorman said glumly. Hamid was becoming more confused and more vague.

"Please listen."

"Go ahead."

"Yaiss. One month ago I was a merchant in Cairo. Married. No children. My name is Fesir Hamid. Upper class. Educated."

"Effendi," Gorman said.

"Yaiss. Then one day I say to myself: 'Amen-ankh, you must go to America. New York.' But my name is not Amen-ankh. Such a name has not been used in Egypt for who knows how long. Still I take all my money, say goodbye to wife, and here I am in New York in Greater Nile Export-Import Company. Why?"

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"Eh? That would seem to be the question, wouldn't it? Well, I'm sorry I can't help you."

GORMAN waved his hands at some papers on his desk as though to show how much work he had. He picked up several of the papers and shuffled them nervously. When he looked up Hamid was still there.

"Now, really," Gorman said. "Amen-ankh, or Mr. Hamid, or whatever your name is, you'll have to leave."

"No. Something is here."

"The police are going to be here if you don't leave. I can tell you that."

Gorman reached for the phone on his desk but Hamid was paying no attention to him. The Egyptian's eyes darted wildly about the room, in search of the mysterious something which had brought him all the way from Cairo.

"Well?" Gorman gave him his last chance.

"Wait! I see something!"

The chunky man behind the desk followed Hamid's eyes to a spot on the wall. A photograph hung there, a picture of a man with studious, deep-set eyes and a white spade beard. The man in the picture wore a pith helmet.

"That man!" Hamid gasped. "What is he doing here?"

Gorman relaxed and leaned back. The danger seemed over. Hamid was not going to become violent.

"That one with the beard?" Gorman asked with a faint smile. "I should think you'd know his picture. It must have been in Cairo papers often enough. That's James Vernor, famous archeologist and Egyptologist. We always handled his transport."

"I have never laid eyes on him before," Hamid half whispered.

"Say!" Gorman grunted. "There's something damned odd about this. Vernor was last in this office one month ago! Just about the time you decided to leave Cairo."

"But why? Why?"

"Simple enough reason. To get a crate we'd had delivered to the office instead of to his home."

"And now? Where is he now?" Hamid was trembling in a fever of excitement.

Gorman leaned back in his chair. His eyes had grown sad and he twined his fingers nervously.

"Where? To a well deserved rest, I should say. James Vernor died two weeks ago."

If he had expected Fesir Hamid to show any signs of disappointment he was wrong. Hamid had seemingly come thousands of miles to see Vernor, yet news of his death was no shock. The Egyptian's eyes still burned.

"It must be the packing case," he whispered. "Yes, the case. Where is that?"

"At his home, I imagine," Gorman said. "He took it with him so I wouldn't know for sure. But that seems the most likely place."

"Yes. Something tells me that is where it is. And now you will tell me, and quickly please, where is his home? I must go there!"

"I don't have his address handy," Gorman shrugged. "But I can get it for you."

He lifted his phone and asked the girl in the outer office to look up the address of James Vernor and bring it to him. She came in a moment later with a slip of paper which she set down before Gorman.

"Let me have it," Hamid said eagerly.

HE REACHED out a bony hand that was like a claw. The nails at the finger ends were long and pointed and slightly curved. Like a bird's, Gorman

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thought. Altogether Hamid reminded him of a large bird. He sat as though on a perch, and when he walked it was stiff-legged, like one of the larger wading birds.

"Just a minute," Gorman muttered as he pulled back the slip of paper. "What the devil do you want? Exactly what?"

"Never mind. Just give me that paper."

"Not so fast. Vernor was a nice old boy, and even if he's gone I wouldn't want his possessions tampered with How do I know you don't intend to steal that case you're so interested in?"

Instead of answering Hamid acted. His hand shot out and snatched the slip from Gorman's fingers. Then the Egyptian turned to run.

But Gorman, smaller though he was, had no lack of courage. He sprang from behind his desk. Now he was convinced he was dealing with either a madman or a crook. As Hamid reached the door and paused to open it Gorman grabbed his arm.

"Give me that slip!" he demanded as he swung Hamid around.

Black eyes that had grown small and beady stared at Gorman over a beak of a nose. Gorman's grip loosened slightly as he took a half step backward. He stared to cry out.

His cry was smothered by the raucous sound which came from Hamid's throat. Then the Egyptian's long arm swung out and the talons at the end of it ripped down across Gorman's jaw, tore through his throat. Blood spurted as the chunky man fell.

Then Hamid was out of the door. The girl looked up and screamed as she saw his reddened hand and the figure of Gorman behind him. From another office a man dashed. He was too late to stop Hamid before the stiff-legged run took him out of the office and into the corridor.

"Call the police!" he ordered the girl.

For an instant he wavered, then ran to Gorman's office and bent over the fallen man. Gorman was alive but bleeding profusely, a pool of red already around him.

It was Detective Lieutenant Bill Meyerson who led a squad into the office five minutes later. A doctor who had an office in the building was already there and fighting to stop the flow of blood.

It was no use. Vital arteries had been severed. Gorman lived only a little longer, but it was long enough for him to tell Meyerson what had happened.

JAMES VERNOR'S study was like one of the ancient crypts from which he had dug so many of his treasures. It was a huge panelled room in his rambling house, and in that room the wide windows were all barred. I couldn't blame him, but it made the place like a great cell, and I was happy when my morning's work was done and I could go into the garden for a walk before lunch.

For a week I had been working in that room, and as always I was uneasy. Not that I hadn't wanted to come. Vernor's will had left all his treasures to the University, and when I was given the chance to do the cataloging and the consolidation of his notes I jumped at it.

He had been my instructor when I was a student. More than that, he had let me assist him in the preparation of his books on ancient Egypt. I could read his hurried scrawl with ease. It was through James Vernor that I had my full professorship, although the youngest man in the department.

Vernor had independent means, and when university regulations grew too confining he gave up his chair. For

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three years he had been conducting his own excavations. From muttered hints we knew he was on to something big, but that was all. Vernor was not one to talk until he was certain of his facts.

And then, just when we were awaiting an announcement of some new discovery, Vernor died. He died mysteriously, without any warning. One day he was alive, the next he was dead. Just that simply. And the doctors could give no cause.

After the funeral I went back to that big house and set to work. The room was light and airy enough, and I was used to working in mustier places. But I was still uneasy. Occasionally I lifted my eyes from Vernor's notes and it seemed as though the ibis in the alcove near the window was watching me.

It was a huge bird, at least three feet high and solid black. Vernor had brought it back from Egypt just before he died. There was something strange about it.

I have seen the ibis in its native habitat. I have seen it stuffed and mounted. I have seen it carved in semi-precious stone and I have seen it hewn on the walls of the crypts of Egypt.

This one was different. It was full life size. If human hands had made it they were the hands of genius. For the bird seemed almost alive. Every detail was perfect, from its long talons to its great bill. Every feather seemed ready to quiver for flight. If a bird had been petrified that was how it would look.

I found myself nodding to it as I got up from the library table on which Vernor's notes were strewn.

"If you don't mind, I'll leave now," I whispered.

I didn't smile, although it had been a faint attempt at humor. The ibis didn't blink. I hadn't quite expected it to. I went out and locked the door behind me.

"THROUGH for the morning?" Anna Vernor asked.

She was sitting under a tree in the garden and the sunlight came through the leaves to glint in her golden hair. We'd known each other for years. For my part I more than just liked her. I wasn't sure how she felt.

"Through for the morning, anyway, and happy to be out here with you," I smiled.

"It's a lonely work, isn't it?"

"Not so bad. I'm used to digging about in the musty past. I'm afraid I'm getting kind of musty myself."

I sat down beside her and for the first time I saw something in her eyes which told me I might have a chance.

"You're not musty, Dick. You'll never be. Dad always said you were a lot like him, that for both of you the past was only the headwaters of the river of Time, and that knowing more about the past kept you closer to the present."

"He once said that to me," I recalled. "He said the past never died."

I shook my head sadly. "He was a great man. When it came to unravelling tangles and cutting through obscurities there was no one like him."

"He was greater than that," Anna smiled. "He could see through the obvious."

I almost jumped from the bench.

"What's the matter, Dick?" Her eyes widened and I felt myself flushing.

"Sorry. But it happens that remark about seeing through the obvious keeps running through his notes. I almost felt as though he himself were speaking."

"Maybe he is, Dick."

"What do you mean?" I wanted to know. "You sound as though you're serious."

"I am. He was on the trail of something big. I know that much. I've

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never seen him so secretive as when he came back from the last excavations. He brought some things with him that he wouldn't let even me see. And when he came out of his study the night before he died his eyes were burning. He'd found the answer to something."

"I wish I knew what," I grunted.

"Haven't you gone through all his things yet?" she asked.

"No. There's one fireproof box I haven't opened. Can't find the key. Is it all right if I break the lock?"

"Certainly."

The way she said the word made it a declaration of trust. I looked at her quickly but she turned her eyes. But when I dropped my hand on hers she made no effort to pull away.

"Anna—" I started to say.

"Yes?"

"Nothing. Nothing now, anyway. When I'm through with this job I'll have something to say."

SHE was staring at me and I forced myself to meet her eyes.

"What's wrong, Dick?" she asked. "Is it something about Dad?"

"Yes. Did he act strange in any way—near the end, I mean?"

"No. More excited than ever, but that was all. Why?"

"Because there's something queer about his notes. They sound like him and yet they don't."

"How do you mean?"

"Well, there's a big difference between Egyptology and mysticism. Your father was always pretty hard-headed. But the last bunch of notes read as though he were going overboard."

"No. Not Dad. He wouldn't go overboard unless he knew something." She sounded sure. She almost convinced me.

"Maybe. When I'm finished I'll know more. By the way, what about that ibis?"

"The big one? He brought it just before he died."

"Something eerie about it," I muttered. Her eyes narrowed.

"I know what you mean. I've seen it several times. The last time I noticed—" She broke off.

"Noticed what?"

"When he brought it there was something suspended from its neck by a chain. Something that looked like a large amulet. The night before he died I brought him a tray and the amulet was gone."

"Seen it since then?"

"No."

"Maybe it's in the fireproof box."

We got up and walked toward the house, our hands touching now and then and both of us very conscious of it. The Vernor housekeeper had lunch ready and waiting for us. Somehow my appetite wasn't too good.

* * *

I looked up to find Anna watching me intently. For a moment I thought I'd dropped food on my vest, but it wasn't that.

"Pta-hotep," she said.

"What about him?" I must have looked very startled because she smiled.

"I don't know. You were staring into space instead of eating. And suddenly you said something that sounded like 'Pta-hotep.'"

"Wouldn't be surprised. That name keeps cropping up all through your father's later notes. If he was an important old Egyptian personage it's odd I shouldn't ever have heard of him. And I haven't."

"Could he be connected with what my father was working on?"

"Of course. But how? Your father apparently expected a great deal from Pta-hotep."

I stood up and pushed my chair back.

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The food just wasn't appetizing any longer, and even the fact that Anna was there couldn't keep me at the table.

"I'm going back to work," I announced.

She merely smiled. When you have a father like James Vernor you get to expect such things.

"See you later," I said. Anna nodded and I went down the hall and into the study and shut the door behind me.

THE Ibis was still there. I started to say hello and changed my mind. It just kept staring at me. I tried to stare it down but I was at a slight disadvantage there.

On the table papers were piled high. To someone else it might have looked like a hopeless mess, but actually I had it in good shape. I'd winnowed out all the purely personal stuff and had gone through most of the pertinent material.

James Vernor had been a brilliant man and his sharp intelligence flashed everywhere in those notes of his. But in the later ones, those he'd written on his last trip to Egypt and after his return, he seemed to ramble off into wildest speculation.

My personal opinion was that Vernor had gone overboard. Maybe when a man gets old he tends to seek the mystical. But I knew what I was going to do. I was going to compile those papers and I was going to leave out anything I thought would hurt Vernor's memory.

The last ones had been the worst. Some of the notions he expressed in the paper I had read that morning had set my head spinning. I shook myself, got out my pencil, and picked up a sheet from the few on my right. I began to read:

"So I was right; there was an Egypt before the Egypt we speak of now. And the answers I sought were buried there, buried with Pta-hotep. That I should have found them was more than mere fortune, I know that now. But what if I had not found them? A moment's thought should show any thinking man that those things must have existed.

"A moment's thought! How foolish to expect that in this age. What is—is. There is our present philosophy. Why part the curtain and try to see further? We think; therefore we are. Descartes said it and we follow.

"But what about that part of us which does not think? What about that part of us which merely knows, yet knows beyond doubt? What about the part whose roots are buried in the dim past?

"We have forgotten how to believe, to truly believe. What we choose to call research is nothing but rationalization. We believe what we choose to believe. We explain everything away that does not fit our beliefs.

"There came a time, the history of Egypt tells us, when famine stalked the land. Stores of food grew ever smaller and soon men began to die of starvation. So desperate became their plight that they were reduced to cannibalism. Yet while they ate each other—and to those civilized people it was as unthinkable as it would be to us—they did not eat the birds or animals which were considered sacred.

"How horrible! we say. They were benighted; they were ignorant; they were superstitious. How loathsome! Not even starvation could make them break the chains of superstition.

"There. We have explained everything. And all by calling names. That they may have been right we will not admit.

"Perhaps I am wrong to feel so superior. Yet I cannot deny that at least in my mind there was a doubt. I did not

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forget the rest of the evidence, the evidence which tells us that those people were not ignorant or benighted.

"And the answer stares us in the face! Those ancient days were closer to the headwaters of the past. Those ancient folk were no wiser than we, certainly not. But no more foolish either. There is only one real difference.

"*They had not had time to forget!*

"They knew. They knew enough to take the lesser evil. They knew. And soon I too shall know. The parchment of Pta-hotep is almost deciphered, and the story is there."

THAT was all. But it was enough to set my head whirling again. What the devil was Vernor hinting at? That he thought the myths were true? But I had known him better than that. If he thought they were true then he must have had a reason, something more than logic.

I got up from the table. The ibis was staring at me. I looked across the room into those beady eyes and all the tales of the past gathered in the room to whisper in my ear.

You were one of the sacred birds, I thought. Or didn't they eat you because you were petrified? You could be easily that old. Perhaps older. As soon as I'm finished with these papers I'm going to have a better look at you.

I shook my head to clear it. Vernor had me going. He had me talking to a bird that had been dead for quite a few thousand years.

But I was interested in something more than a petrified ibis. What Vernor had written about the parchment of Pta-hotep was more important. He had thought that parchment was ancient beyond anything ever discovered. And about that Vernor could not have been deceived.

There was only one place to search for the parchment. The fireproof box. I had gone through everything else. And it was just the place Vernor would have kept his most valuable possession.

The box was not large, but it was made of metal. It stood in a corner of the room. I went to it, bent to look at the lock once more. The lock was simple enough; there was no danger of theft. A screwdriver would be enough to pry it open.

I found a screwdriver quickly, a square-cut, solid thing that would not bend with even a good deal of pressure. Then I set to work. A few twists each way and the lock sprang open. I threw up the lid.

The parchment of Pta-hotep was before my eyes.

I knew it was what I was looking for even before I reached down with trembling hands and lifted it from the box. It was flat and yellow with age. Gently I carried it to the table and set it down.

OLD beyond belief. Older than any written thing in the world. I knew it the moment my eyes took in the ancient script. But how old?

Hieroglyphs are no mystery to me. I can decipher the most difficult if given a little time. But these were no hieroglyphs. Nor were they Coptic. Was it possible that Pta-hotep was one of the ancient Hamites from whom the Copts were descended?

I scanned the writing quickly. It had an Egyptian flavor, of that I was certain. And Vernor had found it in Egypt, or at least his writing led me to believe so.

There was only one thing wrong. I could never decipher that parchment. I knew it on sight. I felt it was Egyptian or pre-Egyptian, but there was not a trace of a really familiar letter or symbol. Only James Vernor could have figured it out.

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And he had! Suddenly I remembered that he *had* deciphered it!

I ran back to the metal box. It held only a single sheet of paper weighted down by a large amulet strung on a metal chain. The amulet held no interest for me. I knocked it aside and pulled out the sheet of paper covered with Vernor's handwriting.

HOW he had done it I would never know. It was as great a feat as the deciphering of the Rosetta stone. Of course once it was done I could easily follow it. I set the paper next to the parchment and settled back:

"To Ra, Giver of Life and Bestower of Death; Ra, who is Life after Death and is Death within Life; I, Pta-hotep, pray for mercy and beg that the radiance of Ra shall not blind me who set down these words.

"That those who follow after may know why the wrath of Ra, who is the Sun, has descended upon us; that they may know and not wonder why their condition has become lowly; why Ra, who is the Father, has ceased to smile; I, Pta-hotep, inscribe these words.

"For in our time these things have come to pass: that we have lived in harmony and peace, and all living things were separate and yet One in the sight of Ra, who is All Knowing; and the lion and the lamb were together in our streets and in our fields.

"And in our time these things are no more. The Earth yields not its bounty. The lamb fears the lion and the lion fears man. There is darkness on the face of the Earth and the Waters come and no man knows another. For Ra, who is the All Powerful, has frowned upon us.

"And it came to pass that Osiris and Isis, who are brother and sister, joined as man and wife. And Ra, who is their Father, grew angry. And He banished them to a place of Darkness which He created. But they were Gods yet.

"And it came to pass that one among us, and his name is Amen-ankh, forever be it Cursed, wished to join the Gods. And he knew that each living thing was different and that only the Gods are truly All in One. Therefore did he this:

"That he joined unto an ibis, for in our time it was yet possible, and begot a child. And Ra, who is the Scourge, grew dark with anger and slew Amen-ankh, may his name be Cursed. And would have slain the ibis.

"But Osiris, with his Power of Darkness, entered the ibis and gave it Life Everlasting, though its appearance is Death, and put about its throat his seal, which even Ra may not profane. And only Amen-ankh could have slain the ibis, and Amen-ankh was dead.

"Therefore this Curse of Ra:

"That Amen-ankh shall live in his begotten son and in his son and so until the day shall come when the seal of Osiris shall be lifted. And then shall Amen-ankh kill the ibis who is his wife and his mother and she shall kill him.

"And until that day an ibis shall be Unclean. And until that day shall Ra hide his face from us. But the wrath of Ra shall never be assuaged, and his breath will be cold upon the Earth. And the lot of Man will be Fire and Flood, Death and Destruction; and the day when Ra looks again upon us will be but the beginning. And after that the end will come slowly, and it shall be Nameless."

I SAT there for a while. There was no question but that the parchment was genuine. And I couldn't doubt that Vernor's translations was perfect. At the bottom of his sheet of paper he had written the key to the script. I checked it against Pta-hotep's parchment.

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This work alone would make James Vernor an immortal in the field of Egyptology. I was looking down at the oldest human work ever discovered, the parchment of Pta-hotep. And Vernor had found it and translated it.

His interpretation of it I could not and would not accept. Pta-hotep might have been a priest who was trying to frighten his flock into contributing more heavily to his temple.

No, that was no good. Pta-hotep claimed that the changes had come in his own time and that he had witnessed them. Then others would have witnessed the same events.

He might have been only a story teller using a device to gain added interest. That seemed more likely. It seemed likely enough to satisfy me.

For the rest, I was overjoyed. I could imagine the way this parchment was going to burst like a bombshell upon the scientific world. Beyond a doubt it proved that civilized man had inhabited the earth thousands of years before we had previously believed, perhaps even tens of thousands of years.

The ibis itself would be a mine of information. I had never seen one quite like it. After the biologists and geologists were through examining it we would have a more exact clue to its age.

I was still lost in a maze of thought and wonder when I heard Anna calling.

She was in the front hall talking to two men when I came up. One of the men was of medium build and rather nondescript. The other was tall and broad shouldered, with a sure manner and keen eyes. It was the big man who was doing the talking.

"I'm sorry to interrupt you, Dick," Anna said. She introduced me. The big man was Meyerson. He flashed his credentials but I didn't even bother to look.

"They've flown down here from New York," she went on. "It seems we may be in some sort of danger."

"I'm certain you are," Meyerson rumbled. "But we're here for more than that. I've got a hunch that the man we want is going to turn up soon. And when he does—" His big hands made a clutching motion.

"Man you want?" I asked. "For what?"

"Murder," he said calmly. My eyebrows shot up and he nodded.

"That's right, Mr. Enderly. A madman, we think. He's killed once and we believe he'd do it again. And all for a slip of paper that had James Vernor's name and address on it."

He went on to tell us the story of Fesir Hamid's visit to the office of Greater Nile. I think he was trying to impress us with the seriousness of the thing because he left out no detail—none at all.

"Any idea of who this Fesir Hamid might be?" he asked when he was finished.

Anna shook her head. I could only do the same. Meyerson nodded.

"Our hunch is that he's a crack-pot. He may have met Mr. Vernor in Egypt and developed a fixed idea that Mr. Vernor did him some harm."

Meyerson's eyes roved the hall and the rooms beyond. He didn't miss a thing in sight.

"On the other hand, he may be after something. Is there anything of great value in this house?"

"A priceless bit of parchment," I told him. "Probably the most valuable object of its kind in the world."

It was Meyerson's turn to look surprised.

"You don't say!" He looked at his companion. "Maybe this Hamid isn't a nut after all."

He turned back to Anna and me. "Mind if we see it?"

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WE LED the two of them into the panelled study. For a moment Meyerson stood in the doorway, his keen eyes taking in the wide windows with their rows of heavy bars. He started when he saw the ibis.

"Looks almost alive," he grunted. He turned and examined the heavy oak door with its bolts and locks.

"Almost burglar-proof. A man would have a job breaking in here," he said approvingly. "Now, where's that parchment you were talking about?"

When I showed it to them Meyerson shook his head doubtfully. His partner was even more skeptical. They had probably expected to see an illuminated manuscript.

One of the windows was open a crack and a breeze came in and fluttered the parchment. I walked over and closed the window and locked it. When I came back Meyerson was still shaking his head.

"You sure that thing is really so valuable?"

"It's beyond price," I smiled. "You're gazing on something that will literally take the scientific world by storm, that will force it to revise its whole conception of antiquity. This bit of parchment is so old that I cannot even hazard a guess as to its age."

"What do you know?" Meyerson's partner grunted.

It was the first thing he had said. Somehow I hadn't formed a high opinion of his intelligence, but I assumed he must be capable. Meyerson seemed more than that.

"If I were you I'd lock this room for a while," the big man said. "At least until we're pretty sure there's no danger."

I could have done some more work but decided to play safe. The study, as Meyerson had said, was almost burglar-proof. There was an old Egyptian sacrificial knife of Vernor's which I had been using as a paper weight. I set it on top of the parchment before we went out.

"With both of you around I don't suppose there's really much danger," Anna said as we walked to the living room.

"Can't ever tell, with a nut on the loose," Meyerson shrugged. "One man or a dozen, it don't make any difference to them."

"Then you still believe this Hamid is a homicidal maniac?"

Meyerson sat down in the big easy chair and crossed his right knee over his left and rubbed his jaw. Then he nodded.

"Yes, Miss Vernor, I do. For several reasons. First, because he murdered Gorman for such small cause. A sane man could have got the address without going to such lengths. And second, because he acted so queerly before that. The girl in the office said he didn't seem to know his own name."

I had been listening, but without really thinking of Meyerson's words. Suddenly something had flashed across my mind. Vernor had removed that amulet from the neck of the ibis. And James Vernor had died soon after, mysteriously and quickly! *Was* there a curse? How about the men who died after opening the tomb of Tutankhamen?

"You look like you'd seen a ghost, Mr. Enderly," Meyerson said.

I felt myself flush. To tell him what had been passing through my mind would have made me feel foolish. I changed the subject.

"What was that about Hamid not knowing his name?" I asked.

"That? Funny thing. She asked him his name and he started to say something like 'Amenhank'. Then he changed his mind. But she didn't be-

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lieve he was kidding, just that he was really confused."

"Amen-ankh! No. He couldn't have said that," I heard myself whisper.

"Huh? What do you mean, he couldn't?" Meyerson's eyes bored through me.

"What's the matter, Dick?" Anna asked anxiously. "You don't look well. You're awfully pale."

"No. I'm all right," I assured her.

"I still want to know why he couldn't have said it," Meyerson reminded me.

"Well," I stammered, "I really don't know that he couldn't have. It's just highly improbable. That type of name hasn't been used in centuries."

"Oh. So it's like I said. He's probably a nut. Thinks he's someone who's been dead for ages, maybe."

"You should have seen what he did to Gorman," his partner put in. "Like a hawk would do, or an eagle."

OR LIKE an ibis. Not a common American bird, so Meyerson and his partner wouldn't think of that. But I did. My mind was whirling like a top.

"Ha," Meyerson grunted. "He'd have to be a pretty fast bird to have beat us down here, Joe." He turned to me. "We hopped the first and fastest plane out of New York."

Mrs. Kemper came running into the room. The Vernor housekeeper was ordinarily a calm, motherly woman, but now her eyes were popping with fear and excitement.

"Someone's trying to get in!" she gasped. "At the back door! I saw him coming and I put on the chain. But he's trying anyway."

Meyerson and his partner were on their feet before she was through speaking.

"You stay here with the women, Joe," Meyerson barked. "You come with me, Enderly."

From his pocket he hauled out a police revolver and from a hidden holster a much smaller gun. He thrust the small gun into my hand. My hand was trembling so I could hardly hold it.

"You stick with me," he ordered. "We'll go around the front and sneak up on him."

He was already running and I was on his heels. I had time to think of Anna. But she would be all right. I knew Joe would not hesitate to shoot.

Then we were out of the front door and going toward the side of the house. Big as Meyerson was he was fast and light on his feet. And he had sized up the situation perfectly. Our feet made no sound on the soft earth. Another man might have run to the back door and frightened the prowler away.

As we drew near the back we heard a scratching sound. Whoever was there had not left. On cat's feet Meyerson swung around the corner. I was right behind him.

Some instinct warned the man at the door. He looked up and saw us.

"Stand or I shoot!" Meyerson shouted, but he did not stop running.

It was Hamid, all right. I recognized him by the description Meyerson had given us. And he had no intention of standing. With a sideward leap he was away from the door.

He ran in a queer, ungainly fashion, stiff-legged like a heron. But those long legs covered a lot of ground. In an instant he was half way across the back garden.

Meyerson had brought his gun down with his command to halt. But I saw now he did not want to shoot unless it was necessary. He was off after Hamid before I had even turned away from the house. And he gained ground quickly.

By the time Hamid had crossed the garden Meyerson was only two yards

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behind him. Another few steps and the detective was on his heels. Hamid started to turn.

And Meyerson left his feet in a flying tackle. Hamid was caught off balance and smashed to the ground, the breath driven from his body. Meyerson's gun swung up and then down against the back of Hamid's head.

"Got him," Meyerson grunted with satisfaction.

He kneeled beside the unconscious man. Working quickly he twisted Hamid's hands behind him and snapped on a pair of handcuffs. Then he rose and hauled the Egyptian to his feet and held him upright.

"Bring them back alive," Meyerson puffed happily. "That's the idea."

Together we hauled Hamid to the back door. I called through it to Anna and she and Joe came and released the chain. Mrs. Kemper hovered behind them. Then we carried Hamid through to the living room and sat him up in a corner of the couch.

HE CAME around rapidly. Meyerson's blow had been delivered with professional accuracy, just hard enough to stun without killing. Hamid's eyes fluttered. Meyerson shook him.

"Feel like talking?" the detective asked.

Hamid shook his head. His eyes were clear but vague.

"All right," Meyerson said. "That's your privilege. We've got the goods on you anyway."

He turned to me. "Thought he might tell us what he came here for," he explained. Then he looked down at Hamid.

"Got here kind of fast, didn't you? How?"

Hamid shook his head again. It seemed rather a disclaimer of knowledge than a refusal to speak. I was watching his eyes. They were growing small and beady.

"Yaiss," he said suddenly. "It is here."

"What's here?" Meyerson demanded.

Hamid shook his head again.

"Spill it," Meyerson advised. "You came here for that parchment, didn't you? That's why you killed Gorman."

"Gorman?" Hamid asked. His eyes were blank.

"Crazy," Joe said. "Like a bed-bug."

"I guess so," Meyerson sighed in agreement. "There's no sense in letting him clutter up Miss Vernor's place any longer."

He hauled Hamid to his feet. "Let's go."

"Wait," Hamid whispered. He was staring down the hall toward the door of the study. His eyes seemed to burn through that heavy oak door.

"What now?" Meyerson muttered.

He followed Hamid's eyes. As he did so Hamid swung a foot up and aimed a kick at him. Meyerson was too fast. He swung on his heel so that Hamid's foot shot past him. Then his broad palm smacked against the Egyptian's cheek and sent him sprawling onto the couch.

There was nothing vicious about the slap but it turned Hamid's cheek red. He was breathing hard as he struggled to a sitting position.

"But nuts," Joe said. "He's looking to get slapped around."

"It is there," Hamid whispered. "There in that room." He had his eyes glued on the oak door again.

"And this is as close as you're going to get to it," Meyerson told him drily. He looked at Joe.

"How about calling the station here for a squad? We can hold him down there until we catch a train out."

"You'll have to keep him overnight," I said. "There won't be another train

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to New York until morning."

"That's what I thought. We'll see that he's on ice until then."

WHILE Anna showed Joe where the phone was Meyerson and I watched Hamid. The Egyptian had spots of color in both cheeks now. His eyes were unnaturally bright, almost feverish. And he refused to take them off the study door.

On a sudden hunch I spoke a few words of Coptic. Hamid showed no understanding of them. There was something queer about him. His few movements were jerky, as though controlled by an outside force. I was becoming uneasy.

Then Anna and Joe came back. Whatever the detective had told our police brought them in a hurry. Within minutes a squad car arrived. Meyerson greeted the police at the door, showed his badge and came back for Hamid.

"Thanks for your help, Enderly," he said. I couldn't help smiling, but Meyerson looked as though he meant it.

After they had left, Anna and I had a few minutes together. She was showing the effects of strain. Mrs. Kemper returned to her room upstairs. I watched Anna.

"What's the matter?" I asked. She shrugged.

"That man Hamid. Something about him affected me. He seemed to be in a trance. As though he were an automaton. And the way he kept looking at the study door."

"He's not what we'd call normal," I admitted.

"It's not just that. I felt that he had some connection with something here in this house. That he came here for a purpose, and that the purpose wasn't merely theft."

"Nonsense. You're nervous, and not without reason. It's a trying thing to have an insane murderer around the house."

I went to her and patted her shoulder.

"Why don't you lie down on the couch and try to relax for a while?"

"Sure, Dick," she smiled affectionately. "I'll be all right in a few minutes. You go back to your work."

"Sure you'll be all right?"

"Of course."

I left her on the couch and walked down the hall to the study. Before the oak door I hesitated. Apprehension gripped me and held me still.

I didn't want to go back into that room. Not for a while yet. Too many things had happened to shake me. Too many things that couldn't be explained. I wanted to break the spell that was weaving itself about me.

Foolish thoughts, I told myself. The whole thing probably had a completely rational explanation. More than one man has been a victim of dual identity. Perhaps James Vernor had known Hamid in Egypt. Somehow Vernor might have mentioned the name of Amen-ankh, and that name could have stuck in a disordered mind until it seemed Hamid's own.

It would have been entirely natural for Hamid to have associated Vernor with that name. And it would have been just as likely that Vernor had become fixed in Hamid's mind as a man who had wronged him in some way.

In that case Hamid's actions assumed a more logical aspect. Logical, that is, for a madman. At any rate, I told myself, we had seen the last of that Egyptian gentleman. Meyerson and the police had him, and the courts would see that he was properly disposed of.

I felt better as I put the key into the lock and went into the panelled study. Activity had purged me of some of my

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brooding uneasiness. It was not such a gloomy vault after all.

Sunlight streamed through the wide, barred windows and brought to sight the rich grain of the dark wood panelling. The ibis stood in its alcove, not such a sinister thing in my present mood. And the parchment of Pta-hotep still lay on the table under the old knife. It was just a bit of parchment, older than any other, but just parchment.

I SETTLED myself at the big table and drew the last of Vernor's papers toward me. The job was almost done, at least that part of it which I would do there.

The rest of it, the compilation of the notes and my report, could be done better at the University. My heart beat faster at the thought of what James Vernor's notes and the Pta-hotep parchment would do to old notions of the age of Egyptian civilization. What a stir it was going to make!

And then Anna screamed.

My chair crashed backward as I spun out of it. I flung the door open and raced down the hall. She was at the far end of it, and she was not alone.

It was Meyerson. As I drew up I saw that his coat was torn and his hat gone. He was bleeding slightly from a cut on his forehead. And he was puffing hard. He had been running.

"He isn't here?" he gasped. I knew whom he meant, and my heart sank.

"No," Anna said. She knew, too. "What happened?"

"The car," Meyerson panted. "Just a few blocks from here. Going down the middle of the street. Went out of control for no reason at all. Hit a tree and rolled over. One man dead. Hamid got away. Figured he'd head back here."

"You'd better sit down," I said.

"No. I'm all right. You haven't heard anything?"

Anna and I shook our heads in the negative.

"Good. Lock this door and we'll take a look in back. He may try to get in that way."

We bolted the door and ran through the living room and through the dining room into the kitchen. The chain was on again. Hamid could not get in that way. Meyerson grunted with satisfaction.

But we had forgotten the windows. There came a crash of shattering glass from the living room. There were no bars on those. Then the sound of a body thudding on the floor, and then there were feet racing.

I beat Meyerson into the living room and into the long entrance hall that faced the study. He was right behind me. We were just in time to see Hamid's tall figure go through the study door.

Meyerson's revolver was in his hand. He grabbed my shoulder and flung me out of the way.

"I'll take him! He may have picked up a gun!" His big body hurtled down the hall toward the study.

I saw him go through that doorway. And as he did so the room beyond turned black!

The door slammed shut behind Meyerson.

"Call for help!" I shouted to Anna.

Disregarding Meyerson's warning I raced down the hall and flung myself at the heavy oak door. It was locked. With fumbling fingers I fitted keys into locks. No use.

The door was too heavy to break down. Panting, I pressed my ear to it and listened. Meyerson had a gun, but there were no shots. I pressed closer.

There were sounds. Strange raucous cries. Through the door there came a

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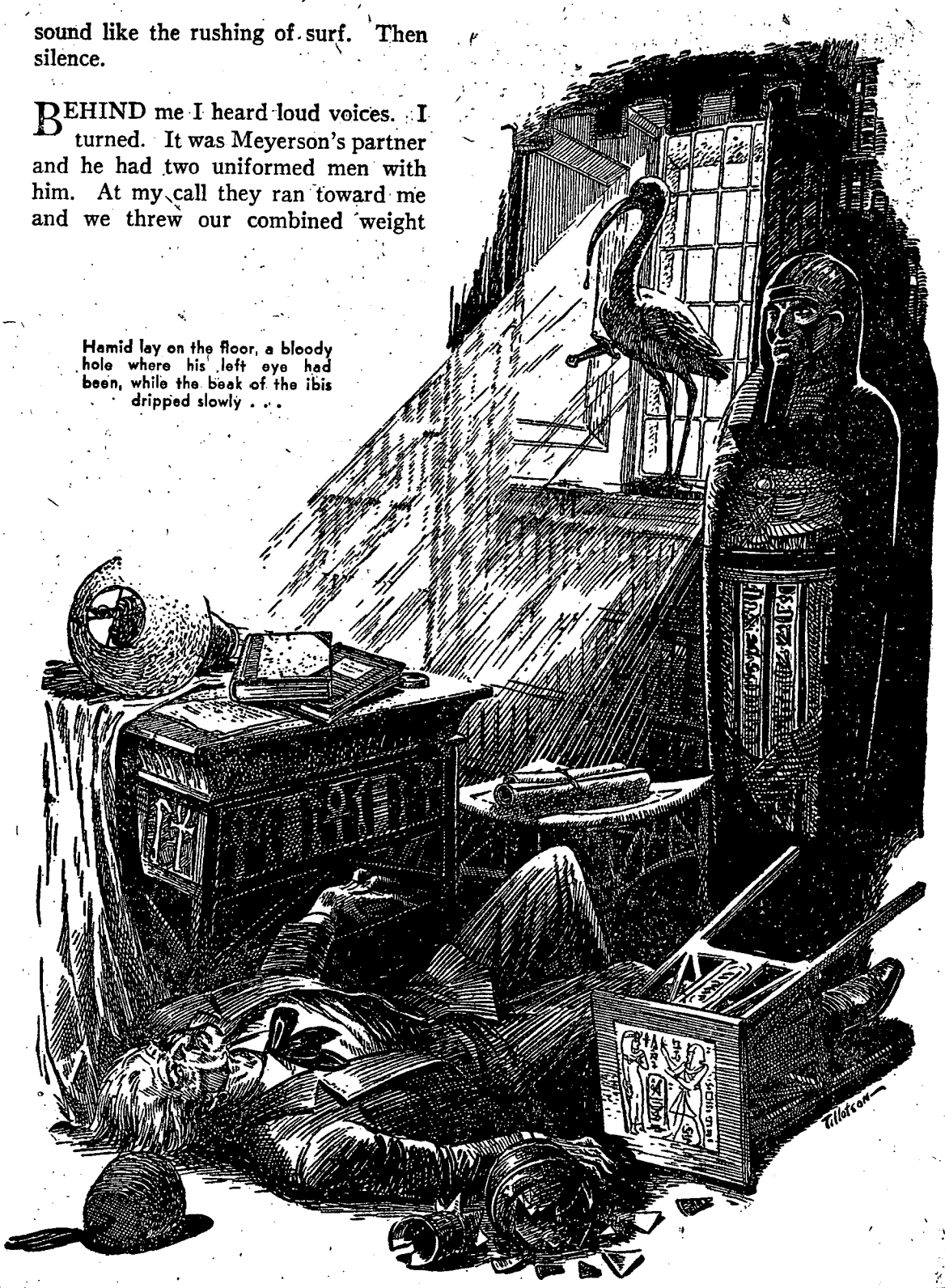
sound like the rushing of surf. Then silence.

BEHIND me I heard loud voices. I turned. It was Meyerson's partner and he had two uniformed men with him. At my call they ran toward me and we threw our combined weight



Hamid lay on the floor, a bloody hole where his left eye had been, while the beak of the ibis dripped slowly . . .

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against the oak door.

For a while it resisted us. And then suddenly it sprang open and we hurtled into the room and half way across it. The study was filled with light.

Meyerson sat on the floor in the far-corner, the unfired gun still in his hand. His eyes were open but the light of reason was gone from them, and from his lips came a babbling, wailing sound.

Hamid lay next to the door. Blood welled from gashes on his cheek. But it was not that which had killed him. For he was dead. I forced myself to look at him.

In death his nose was more beak-like than before. And his left eye was small and beady and black. His right eye was gone. It had been pierced by some pointed thing that had gone into his brain killing him instantly.

The ibis stood across the room in its alcove. While the others tended to Meyerson, I crossed the room and looked at it. The ancient sacrificial knife which had lain on the table was buried in its side.

And at the point of its long bill blood dripped slowly!

* * *

The official investigation was unsatisfactory. Nothing was really explained. Meyerson was declared to be suffering from some shock which had deranged his mind.

Hamid? How had he died? The windows were all locked. Nothing could have entered the room. What about the blood on the bill of the ibis?

There was an explanation for that. Hamid had run across the room in a desperate attempt to escape. He had struck his eye directly on the bill. And then he had tottered back to the door.

But I saw the doctor after he read that part of his findings at the inquest. He was shaking his head. He knew even better than I that Hamid must have died instantly. Hamid should have been found beside the ibis.

And how about the knife that was buried to the hilt in something that was hard enough to resist strongest steel? Nobody was concerned about that except me. And I knew enough not to say what would not be believed.

I wrote the report coldly, and I turned over to the University the parchment of Pta-hotep and Vernor's translation of it. Everyone was too excited to think about a man's death in connection with the parchment. Or the ibis.

But I thought about it. And I wanted nothing more to do with things Egyptian. I told myself that I had not seen the room go black, that I had not heard those sounds.

I wanted to forget everything that might remind me of the parchment of Pta-hotep and the curse of Ra. I gave up my chair at the University and Anna and I bought the farm. And after years the thing faded somewhat.

But yesterday I saw Meyerson.

I can no longer deny what happened in that room. The old gods are with us again, the forces of darkness are loose. Fire and flood. Death and Destruction. The End will come. And it will be nameless.

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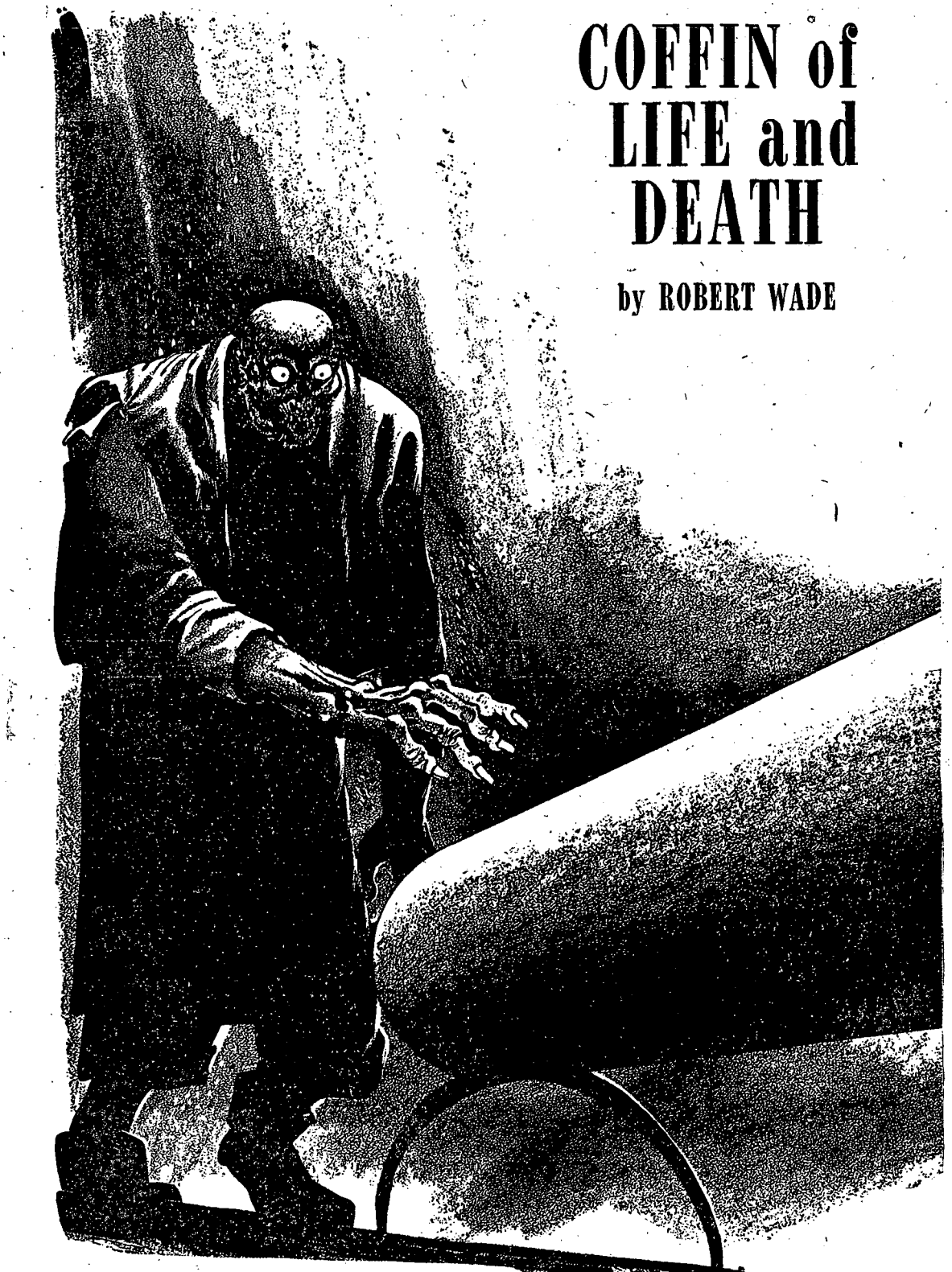
COFFIN of LIFE and DEATH

by ROBERT WADE



The creature came forward slowly, its claw-like hand stretched outward . . .

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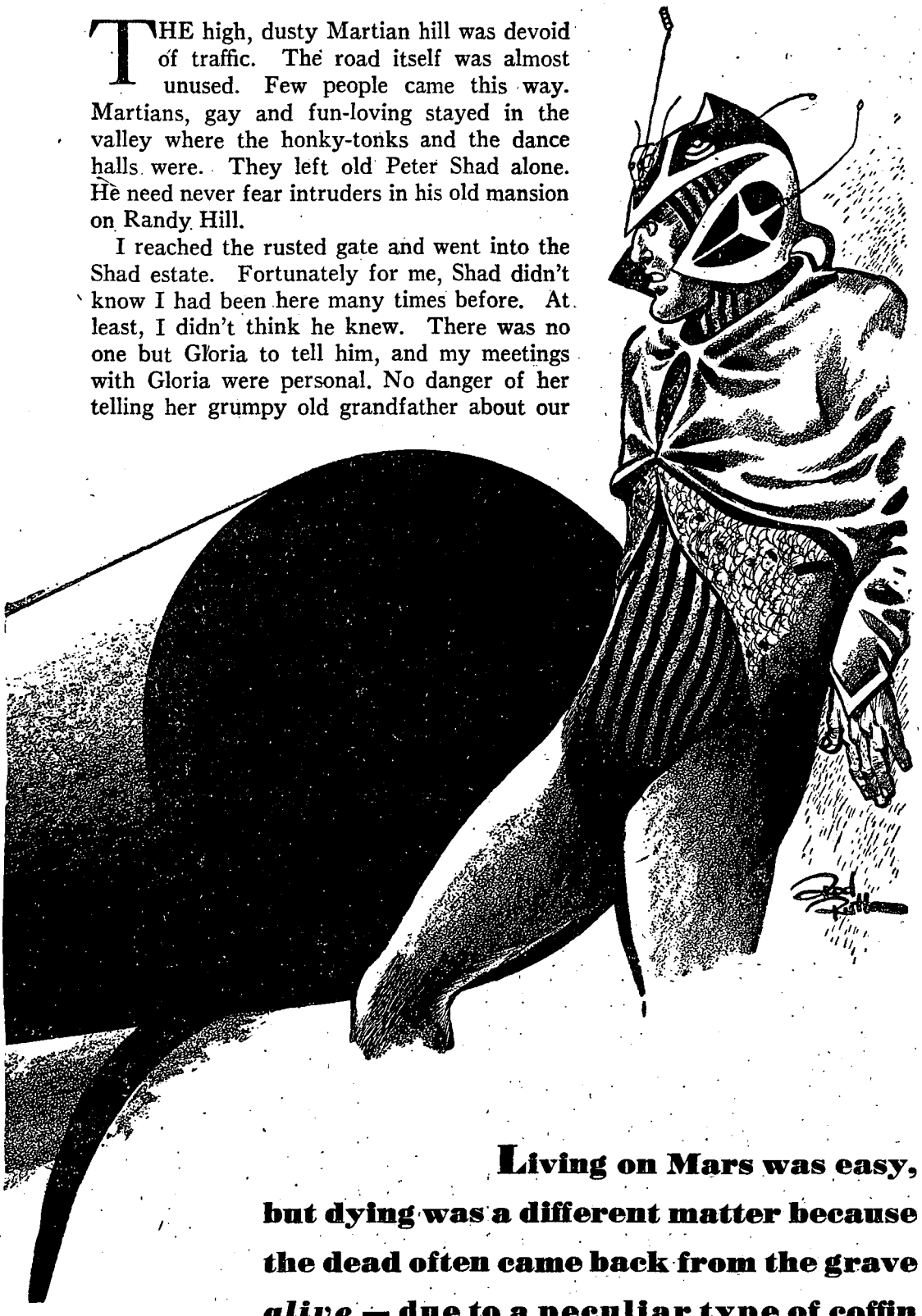
THE high, dusty Martian hill was devoid of traffic. The road itself was almost unused. Few people came this way. Martians, gay and fun-loving stayed in the valley where the honky-tonks and the dance halls were. They left old Peter Shad alone. He need never fear intruders in his old mansion on Randy Hill.

I reached the rusted gate and went into the Shad estate. Fortunately for me, Shad didn't know I had been here many times before. At least, I didn't think he knew. There was no one but Gloria to tell him, and my meetings with Gloria were personal. No danger of her telling her grumpy old grandfather about our



Living on Mars was easy, but dying was a different matter because the dead often came back from the grave *alive* — due to a peculiar type of coffin

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wandering among the twisted, aged trees that surrounded the house. No fear of her telling him that she and I hoped some day to elope to some small Venusian valley and escape Shad's domineering rule.

For the present, I preferred to remain unknown. Blake Wallace, member of the Martian to Earth Free Lance Space Pilot's Association. A rather windy title for a group of hardened pilots who flew everything and anything along the badly charted course.

For the present, as I said, I remained just Blake Wallace, answering an ad in the Martian *Space News*.

The ad was worded queerly, but being accustomed to Peter Shad and his ways, I took this opportunity to penetrate the old fort-like mansion in which Shad kept his granddaughter in virtual isolation.

I found my way around the house and to the small, windowless door at the rear. A huge sign on the front door had told me:

"Visitors please go to the rear entrance."

That was Shad's way of putting people, high and low, in their proper place.

I knocked and waited. A dog started howling within the house. As I waited, my eyes moved once more over the rough blocks of *sticka*, brought from the quarries of Mars and stacked in rough, rugged lines to make a home. It was a poor choice of building material. Sticka is black as night and not unlike soft coal in appearance. It doesn't make for a cheerful residence.

The door opened abruptly and I faced Peter Shad. He was a tall, stooped man, in his late sixties. His eyes, black as midnight, studied my space uniform. The uniform is good-looking and I wore it to make a good impression on the old coot.

"Yes?" he said.

"My name is Wallace," I said, "Blake Wallace. I'm answering your ad in the *Space News*."

I can't understand why the man put me on the defensive. Usually I'm not the timid type. He seemed to catch me before I was ready to speak. Later I was to learn why. Peter Shad's mind was a long way ahead, thinking and speaking through his lips before most men had time to prepare themseles for his verbal outburst.

"Come in."

His voice was colorless, without inflection. I might have been a dog, summoned to the kitchen for my dinner.

He turned and went into the dusty, un-used kitchen. The man had an odd, shuffling walk that reminded me of the Zombies of Venus. Like death, the walk was. Death on its feet, moving ahead slowly, stiffly.

I walked across the kitchen, noticing the filth and rubbish that had collected there. Gloria had told me what to expect.

"Grandfather has our meals brought up from Ardun," she said. "They are left on the porch and he brings them in himself. I eat in the library."

She had shuddered then, and continued:

"Grandfather lives alone—in the locked room."

The locked room was a place she had hated since she came to Peter Shad a dozen years ago. A place that she could never enter and where he lived alone. A place of queer sounds that came through the sturdy *pith* door.

SHAD went along a dark hall and ahead of me, I could see a fire burning in a fireplace in the library beyond. We entered the library. Gloria, reading in a chair by the fire, arose slowly. Her violet eyes, intense, fearful, warned me not to betray our friendship. Her

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hair, black as the *sticka* stone, gleamed in the light of the small fire.

Shad motioned to her.

"My granddaughter, Gloria."

I took her hand, not daring to hold it.

"I'm very glad to meet you, Miss . . . ?"

"Williams," she said. "Gloria Williams."

She backed away from me toward the fire.

Shad said, "Come with me."

We went out of the library, up a rickety flight of stairs and Shad paused before a huge door. He produced an electric *key* from his pocket, rapped lightly at the panel and a silvery, musical note came from the panel. The door opened and he motioned me inside.

This was the locked room. The room that Gloria had never been allowed to enter. Then was I to learn Peter Shad's secret?

Frankly I was disappointed. The place was as dirty as the kitchen. A combination library and bedroom, I thought, as I surveyed the book lined walls and the unmade bed in one corner. There was a desk. The dim flame of the *trupa* juice lamp flickered over it.

Peter Shad seemed not to notice my curiosity. He shuffled to the desk and sat down. There was no place for me to sit. I stood there looking at him.

His cloak was dark and dropped to his knees. His eyes continued to burn into me. The remainder of his face was pale and sunken. He might have been dead, save for the intense life in those eyes.

"You said your name was . . . ?"

"Blake Wallace," I said. "You advertised for a Free Lance pilot to handle a charter trip to earth."

It was all business then. I had to sell myself first. Later, perhaps I could gain his friendship and dare to tell him about Gloria and myself.

I produced a leather folder from my pocket and spread my credentials and recommendations before him. I was proud of those papers. I had letters from King Wanta of Venus, Carpus Wiley, the prominent earth pilot, and many others. I noticed that his eyes were approving when he passed them back to me.

"You seem to be a reliable young man," he said. "You are a fine flyer, if these credentials are in order."

He looked thoughtful.

"Of course I could check up on them."

Anger surged up within me, but I controlled myself.

"I assure you that they are."

He nodded.

"You seem to be a fairly honest man. You have the strength for the work. You look clean cut, intelligent."

Then came the blow.

"But I can't use you."

"Why not?" I snapped. "I know the ropes. I'm as good a man as you can find. You asked for . . ."

I was on my feet, knowing that my chances were slipping, hating to lose in the first round.

He held up his hand.

"I need more than a pilot," he said. There was the ghost of a smile touching his bloodless lips. "I need a man who has knowledge of science. A thinker."

"I studied under Newton at Harvard," I said. "I took his course in free thought and did some work with Doctor Pierce of Winston Hospital."

I had mentioned two of the best known students of the human mind. His eyes brightened.

"You studied under Pierce?"

I remembered one of old Pierce's favorite sayings.

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"The human mind is an enigma. Open it and you have all the hate and love—the faith and fear of civilization, placed before you on a white sheet of paper. Study it at will and you will learn how foolish and yet how wise we animals are."

Peter Shad was interested.

"I taught Pierce," he said. "You'll do, Mr. Wallace. Bring up your flying gear tonight. You have a job."

I MIGHT have been prepared for a trap. At the time I didn't realize how deep a mind Peter Shad had. Later, it was much too late to remedy my mistake.

It happened in the hall below. Shad left me with Gloria while he answered the rear door. I had not heard the sound, but he said someone had knocked and he would see who had come.

When he disappeared into the kitchen, I hurried to Gloria's side. I'm afraid she was a little too happy, for our embrace lasted a second longer than it should have.

When I released her, Shad was standing in the library door. He seemed not to have noticed. I said goodbye to Gloria, and followed Shad to the door. He reminded me to report that night. Then he was gone and I went down the hill, cursing myself for taking that useless a risk. A kiss had created a trap—and the trap was ready to spring.

I reported to the house on the hill that night at seven. I had with me the precious case of navigation instruments that every pilot has to own, if he plans to fly the winding asteroid course. They are his right arm, his mechanical brain, to avoid death among the whirling asteroids. I brought also the space suit that I had had since joining the service and a small bag of personal belongings.

Shad met me at the door and took me directly to his room. Something had been brought here since I left that afternoon. It stood under the window, a shiny, closed *stamin-steel* coffin, used by most of the better class Martians. The thing gave me quite a start. It had the usual line of vents along the sides.*

However, I noticed with sudden horror that the whistle valves that would warn of life in the casket, had been carefully removed. The coffin was sealed. I stared at it with sudden, intense forebodings.

Shad said:

"I will explain the coffin shortly. Meanwhile, we will talk."

This time he offered me a chair which he had evidently brought, with the coffin, from some other part of the house.

"I mentioned that for this venture, I would need a man who understood science and something of the human mind. Why I demand this will later become evident to you."

My eyes crept to the coffin and re-

**Editor's Note: Stamin-steel, an unusual combination of earth steel and a Martian super metal known as stamin —for stamina. The odd climatic conditions on Mars cause people to die at times when they are not truly dead. The air vents are open, to the air, through a series of metal pipes that lead to the surface. A small button is placed to the right of the corpse. If this button is pressed, a series of high-pitched whistles warn the grave-watchers that the grave should be opened at once. Ten years have been known to pass, and yet after all that time, the whistles had saved a recreated Martian from a horrible death below ground—an avoidable death.*

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mained there. I tried to look away. I wanted to ask for Gloria. . . .

I FORCED my eyes away from the grim casket and looked back at Shad.

"You have heard many things about me, Wallace," he said. "Most of them unpleasant."

He grimaced.

"I'm not interested in the average man or his mind. We have nothing in common. I would never have let you come here if you hadn't been indispensable to me. I must have another man. A man who can keep his mouth shut."

He paused and drew a sheath of papers from his desk. He passed the top one to me.

"Read."

I read the sheet of printed matter with growing bewilderment. It was issued from the New York office of James Drake Trumble, foremost earth student of mechanics. Trumble, Inc., manufactured the entire working personnel of many huge earth factories. His robots were known as the nearest perfect mechanical models of the human race. Trumble was constantly giving millions to scientists who could improve his robots.

This was but one of dozens of his prize lists, distributed throughout the solar system, offering prize money for new robot inventions.

"Read it carefully," Peter Shad said. "Every word is important."

His voice was suddenly harsh—demanding.

I read the circular:

"Prize List for the year of 2500—issued from the offices of Trumble, Inc., New York, N. Y.

"It is known that Trumble, Inc., leads the field in the production of robot labor. Trumble, Inc., supplies earth factories with complete groups of radio controlled labor. In its never ending search for improvements, Trumble, Inc., offer the following prize money this year for better, more dependable robots.

"Specifications are left to the discretion of the inventor. Our robots must respond quickly to the given command and at no time fail to respond by following the spoken word of their control masters. They must be devoid of feeling, efficient, insensitive.

"Trumble prize money will be paid as follows, by personal check on the Bank of United Planets, New York City."

There followed a list of cash prizes that made my hand tremble.

"We are interested only in the first prize," Peter Shad said. His eyes had been on me since I started to read. "We are visiting New York, and Mr. James Drake Trumble. *We are going to leave New York with fifteen million dollars.*"

To say that he startled me would be putting it mildly. I had never suspected that Shad was interested in things mechanical.

"I asked you to read that notice carefully. The offer is very important, and the exact terms of the offer are *most* important. You will guard that paper carefully. Keep it on your person."

He passed me an envelope, sealed with the Shad seal.

"Keep this with the paper. Do not open it until we are in the offices of James Trumble. Open it when he asks for a demonstration of our model. On these papers, you will find a series of Martian words. I will mention a few of them. They are the *control words* that will cause our robot model to respond."

He tapped his thin index finger on the desk, warningly.

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"Do not mention these words, even in my presence, until that time comes. Here are a few examples."

He reeled off a dozen common Martian words.

"*Rela,*" he said, "meaning *move forward.*"

I nodded, remembering his warning not to repeat them.

"*Twan,* meaning *stop,*" he sighed. "*Cwa*—you know its meaning. There are hundreds of others, all on your list. I am tired."

He arose.

"Now, the coffin," he said. He went to it and rubbed his hand along the smooth top.

"HERE lies our most precious asset," he said. "Worth fifteen million dollars to James Drake Trumble in New York."

A great burden seemed lifted from my shoulders. Then Gloria wasn't in the coffin. The coffin was strong and heavy. I could understand now why Peter Shad made use of it. A fifteen million dollar robot was far too precious to risk breakage.

"But why did I have to have the list of control words? Why was I chosen to carry these precious papers to earth?

"I am going with you," he said, and his voice suddenly sounded tired. "But I am an old man. I have checked up on your background. You are as honest as you are handsome. Your reputation is as good as those gray eyes of yours. I can trust you if anything happens to me."

He hesitated, then went on:

"We will spend a week here. You must not leave the house. It would be folly to allow you in town, where your tongue might slip. This is too valuable a property to risk losing."

He touched the coffin again, lightly. "A robot—made exactly to the specifications."

He went to the door and held it open. I had never seen such a change in a man. Now that I shared his responsibilities, he seemed to have deflated, grown older.

"We will not trouble Gloria tonight," he said. "You may take the room across the hall. Don't leave. The doors are wired with *spectra* (space electricity of high voltage). You see, I cannot trust even myself with this secret. Later, we can both relax. We will leave in seven days. You will call the spaceport once, the day we go. You will arrange for a freight-cab to come here. You, I and the robot will go in complete secrecy."

I went across the hall and entered the other bedroom. It was neat, for a wonder, and the linen was fresh. I wished I could see Gloria and tell her the secret of the room and why Peter Shad had insisted on complete isolation within his room. I was tired out however, and soon fell asleep. The folder of precious papers was under my pillow.

The next week was a hell of uncertainty for me. Never once did I see Gloria, and I was angered because Peter Shad gave me no explanation. So far as he was concerned, I deserved none. He wasn't supposed to know that I thought of Gloria every second of the day. That I searched the house from attic to cellar, looking for her—and hesitated in my search only when he was with me.

I couldn't leave now. Yet, if I mentioned the girl, I would betray myself.

Stronger as the days passed, grew the conviction that Gloria Williams was in that coffin.

I would sit in the study with Peter Shad, perspiration standing out on my forehead, trying not to look—trying to listen to him. He talked much, and

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as the days passed, his voice changed, grew weaker and sounded as though it had been effected in some manner.

HIS face was as white as the Martian sands. The sands beyond the red desert, where the *vultee* birds waited endlessly for the unwary traveler.

"Remember," he said, "whatever happens, you are to open the envelope of key words only when you are admitted to Trumble's office. If anything strange happens, ignore its strangeness. If I cannot carry on, you must do my work for me."

He would lapse into a coma and I would leave the room, worried about his health, unsure of myself. Once more I would wander like a lost fool through the house, looking for the girl I loved.

Our meals were brought and left in covered *silver tainers* on the porch. I would take food to Shad and eat a little myself.

On the sixth day, Shad was alone in the study. I went to him.

"I've been worried," I said in a casual voice, "about your granddaughter. I haven't seen her since. . . . ."

His eyes blazed momentarily, then faded and seemed to recede into his head.

"You are not to be concerned about my granddaughter," he said. "She has left the house until we return. She has gone to Sparna. The trip to earth is a strain for one so young and she could not stay here alone."

I dared not ask about her again, but I knew Sparna, the city of temples beyond the red desert. I knew that Gloria had no friends there. In my mind there was no doubt that the man was deliberately lying.

The seventh day came. I called the space-port and got a thrill out of Randy Southers' breezy voice.

"For Jade's sake, Wallace, where have you been?" were his first words. "You missed a fat contract two days ago. A millionaire charter trip to California."

"I'm busy," I said. "Drag out the Z-15 and polish her tubes, will you? I'm going to earth on a special trip. It's worth more than your millionaire."

He whistled.

"Something *really* good, huh? Okay, sport, the Z-15 will be standing by; all tubes filled, in two hours. What time you exploding your rockets?"

I looked at my watch. It was six in the afternoon. I had made up my mind to go through with the deal. It would be better to load the coffin after dark. I was forced to make my own decisions now, for Peter Shad refused to talk for more than a few seconds at a time. He had withdrawn completely into himself, leaving the details of the trip entirely up to me.

"Send a freight-cab up at seven," I said, and gave him the address. "Stand by at eight-fifteen. Will you notify the officials?"

I had to have a pass to slip-out at the port. I didn't want any trouble. This trip was already overloaded with mystery—though just what the danger was, I couldn't put a finger on.

Randy said:

"I'll move the ship out to Dock Z-11. The pass will be arranged. What fuel you carrying? 10,000 Retain or 5,000 Super-Charge?"

I completed the arrangements and said good-bye.

"Don't get mixed up with the asteroid belt," he warned as I hung up. "Too damned many corpses out there already."

Cheerful note, I thought. Right in line with my thinking at the moment.

I told Shad to get ready.

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"I am ready," he said. "There are no more arrangements to be made."

I had to accept his explanation of Gloria's absence. There was no alternative, if I was to go through with the trip.

The freight-cab came at seven sharp, thanks to Randy Southers' work. I loaded the coffin myself, with the help of the roller wheels beneath it. The freight-cab had no window at the rear of the pilot's seat, and I thanked my lucky stars that I could load the thing in secrecy. Martian freight cab-drivers are lazy people. They work under the assumption that as long as they can stay seated behind the wheel, they won't have to help load freight.

Peter Shad and I climbed into the huge driver's seat and we moved swiftly down the drive.

DOCK Z-11 looked damned good to me. The field was like home. The row upon row of landing docks, some of them occupied by the neat, slim army liners, others filled with squat, rusty freighters. A freighter took off just as we drove onto the field, squirting violet and red flame from its tubes, and drowning out all minor sound with its thundering tube exhaust.

Randy Southers was waiting for me at Dock Z-11 with the pass. It seemed good to feel the reality of his warm hand-shake and see that fat, freckled face again. It was as though I'd lived in a dark, musty tomb for a week, and was emerging into the sun once more. Randy seemed worried about me.

"Where in the name of Jade have you been?"

I put a finger to my lips and grinned at him.

He snorted in pretended indignation. "Oh, hush-hush, Huh? Hope you ain't planning on carrying a load of stink-weed this trip."

Stink weed was our term for Martian *ariz-powder,* a dope peddled only at the risk of death, or at best the loss of our pilot's license.

"No danger," I said. "I love my work, *and* my neck."

He said: "S'long—Stop by the office when you come back. I'll dig out a bottle of sparkle water."

We shook on that. I had the freight cab backed up to the open lock of the Z-15 and loaded it carefully into the ship. The cab driver showed the same reluctance to help, and I blessed him secretly for it.

I helped Peter Shad into the lock and up the steps into the control chamber. He stumbled and almost fell several times. He muttered thanks into my ear when I helped him, but seemed too weak to speak at length. Finally the freight-cab was gone. I had secured both air locks and checked my fuel. I opened the bag of navigation instruments, strapped them into place on the control board and checked them also. These instruments cost more on Mars than an estate with a swimming pool. We pilots usually owed money on them until we died. It was worth it. Every pilot had that set of metallic guides to thank for saving his life many times over. Without them, the astroid belt would be sure murder.

I plugged in the genie-screen and checked with the control office.

"Z-15—Pilot Blake Wallace, seeking clearance to earth," I said.

It was routine stuff. I had mouthed those words a thousand times.

Headquarters office and Speen Johnson's tanned face came into view on my receptive-screen.

"Hello Blake," Spleen said, "Long time no see. Got your pass?"

I took it from my pocket and held it so he could see the pass through the

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lense of the genie-screen.

"Okay," he said, "Say, there's a blonde in Brooklyn named Gretta Willow. Haven't seen her for six months. Look her up and . . ."

"Go to blazes," I said, and grinned. "You take care of your own women. I got problems of my own."

He chuckled.

"Explode your rockets, Pilot," he said. "Anyhow, call up Gretta and give her my best. Tell her I'm coming in one of these nights, and I better find her alone."

I blanked the screen and checked the rocket charges. The power was up, the fuel, 5,000 Super-Charge.

I looked up the slanted sight toward the blazing Asteroid belt and repeated words what every pilot said as he pulled down the release jet control.

"Here comes murder."

I pulled the control lever down—hard.

THE asteroid belt isn't bad—not after you get through it. After that it was a matter of contacting the Long Island Port, making arrangements for a landing, and time did the rest.

The handling of the coffin would be rather tough. I decided on telling the truth, so far as Peter Shad's explanation of the coffin was concerned. I told the Long Island manager that I was bringing in a special robot, packed in a Martian coffin. He was a thin-faced, sallow complected man. I had never seen him personally. We had talked many times on the genie-screen.

"Of course," he said dryly, "there'll be the matter of inspection. Can't take chances on *ariz-powder* smuggling, even with a man of your caliber."

I did a little fast thinking.

"Contact James Trumble," I said. "Tell him that Peter Shad, Martian scientist, is delivering a robot of a revolutionary new type. Tell him that the machinery is delicate and cannot be risked by a careless inspection. You can send an inspector to Trumble's office. He will be present when the coffin is opened. Will that do the trick?"

He was doubtful, but I knew that the name Trumble was not to be lightly reckoned with. After a time he promised to call Trumble. In ten minutes he was back on the screen.

"Trumble says it's satisfactory with him," he said. "He seems quite curious about the whole thing."

"Good," I said. "It's a relief for me to know that."

It sure was. I was afraid that when the coffin was opened, I would find something vastly more delicate and lovely than a robot. That thought persisted all the way in on the last stretch.

When we landed at Long Island, one of Trumble's trucks was waiting, and a frigid faced customs inspector kept an eagle eye on the coffin. Peter Shad was worse. He seemed paralyzed when I helped him from the ship. He couldn't walk, and I had to call a special car.

"I suggest that you enter a hospital," I said. "You're not in condition to see Trumble today."

He interrupted me with an angry grunt.

"I'll see Trumble at once," he said. "There isn't much time."

I knew there wasn't, not if Peter Shad ever expected to see his robot in action and collect the fifteen million that his heart was set on. Peter Shad was dying. I had seen men go to pieces before. He was paralyzed from the waist down.

Trumble, Inc., occupies an entire block in down-town New York. The building, seventy stories of it, is made completely of synthetic marble. Trum-

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ble wasn't putting on a front. He was *big business* in the United States and he advertised it with immense, wealthy demonstrations. This building was a demonstration of his wealth. Trumble robots gave the old "working-class" freedom from the factories. Carefully controlled, production never went over the limits. People lived quietly and on a good scale.

I admired Trumble, but I had never dreamed of entering a venture that would end in acquiring fifteen million of his good money. If I hadn't been so deadened by the pain of worrying about Gloria, I might have appreciated all this more. In addition, Peter Shad was really in bad shape now. I knew that he must be rushed from Trumble's office directly to a hospital. Only his own iron-clad determination allowed me to help him out of the car and into the elevator that bore us upward toward the sun, to Trumble's vast suite of rooms. The coffin went up with us, and with the coffin, the customs agent.

Trumble, as a man, showed nothing of his wealth. The massive desk, the perfectly trained robot secretaries, the rich furnishings of the office reflected wealth. Trumble was a small man, almost lost behind the desk, eager eyes covered by glasses, his clean fingers tapping the plastic top of the desk. After meeting Trumble and explaining that I was only Peter Shad's assistant, I obtained permission to wheel in the coffin and to carry Peter Shad to a comfortable chair.

Then we sat down. It was a great moment in a way, and yet a horrible one. Success for Peter Shad, when success was too late. Shad had been afflicted, it seemed to me, with a terrible form of paralysis. In addition to that, I had to worry over what the coffin contained.

I hoped against hope that Gloria Williams really was in that far off Martian city, safe and waiting for our return.

"I am to understand," Trumble said in a friendly voice, "that you have brought a perfected robot, created to meet my specifications, that it is housed at present in this coffin, and it will be far more clever and adaptable than anything we now produce?"

Peter Shad's head nodded.

His hands, resting on the chair arms, were motionless. Was paralysis affecting even those hands?

"You are correct in all but one respect," Peter Shad's voice was low, measured. "The robot is here. It is *not* in the box."

Trumble looked surprised. I started to say something, then remained silent. It was Shad's show. If he didn't finish in a hurry, he might not be able to go on.

"Why did you bring the coffin?" Trumble asked in a puzzled voice. "I don't think I understand."

Peter Shad's hand dipped forward, then straightened. The muscles of his neck were working—perhaps hardening.

"You will understand everything in a short time," Shad said. Then with every word measured and spoken mechanically and with great pain, he went on. "You made an offer, James Drake Trumble, and I have filled every obligation of that offer. You are a man of great honesty. A man who will fulfill his every promise. I know that, for I was careful to check your personal reputation before I started this madness."

HE TURNED to me, and I saw fear —ugly fear in his eyes. He gasped for breath.

"Blake—open the letter. *Open the letter before it is too late.*"

His head slumped forward and he

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was silent.

The customs agent jumped to his side. He felt Shad's pulse.

"This man is dead," he said quickly. "You shouldn't have brought him here."

Shad dead?

Then it was too late. The venture had failed. I had depended on Shad. He himself had said that the coffin was empty—or rather, that the robot was not in it.

The agent and James Trumble were over Shad's body now, seeking some sign of life, and finding only death.

I remembered Shad's last words.

"Open the letter."

Neither man seemed to know what to do next. Trumble turned to me.

"This man was obviously in a bad condition. You had no right to bring him here."

I hardly heard him. I had torn the envelope from my pocket and opened it. There were half a dozen pages of Martian words. *Key words* to control the robot. They were useless now, I thought. I found a page of closely written script. I started to read it, and then, something in my brain turned over and I started to see things clearly.

"Listen," I said, and Trumble stood there, looking at me as though I was a mad man. "Listen. This is contained in an envelope of sealed instructions. You've got to understand that I've known Peter Shad for only a short time. He gave me this envelope when I met him. It's addressed to you."

Trumble took it from me and started to read. I could see the wrinkles appear on his forehead. He rounded the desk slowly and sat down.

"I guess," he said, without looking up, "that in fairness to all of you, this should be read aloud."

He read in a hushed voice:

"James Drake Trumble
Trumble, Inc.
New York City, N. Y.
Dear Sir:

At the beginning, I wish it clear that I have nothing but honest admiration for you and for the way you run your business. However, I also had a business. It was the task of probing into man's body and mind, and finding there certain qualities that affect life and death.

"On Mars, there is a death that is *not* death. It causes people to die in a manner that resembles *true* death, and to be buried in that condition. Methods have been perfected to save such people, if they revive after burial. They are not perfect, and many suffer the hell of a second death within their coffin."

Trumble hesitated and stared across the room at the gleaming coffin. I was reminded sharply of Gloria, yet I was fascinated by the letter. Here, I thought, lies the true mind of Peter Shad. What is he seeking? What will he gain?

Trumble went on:

"Once I, Peter Shad, was a rich man. I sought a drug or a chemical cure for false death. I found it. However, to serve the people of Mars, the drug would have to be produced in immense quantities. There would have to be special instruments, huge clinics to handle and sort the true dead from the false.

"My money was spent on research. I tried to borrow, but people thought me mad. I couldn't tell them why I needed money. I was classed as a recluse, a fool.

"THIS year your folder offering prizes for perfect robots came to my attention. Do not misunderstand me, Mr. Trumble. I haven't produced a robot that will be of value to you. It

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will not be. However, I claim to have perfected the robot to a point that it will respond perfectly to every command.

"Your rules were as follows:

'Our robots must respond quickly to the given command and at no time fail to respond to the command given by control masters. . . . Specifications are left to the discretion of the inventor.'"

Trumble stopped reading then, and stared at the corpse half sitting in the chair. I suspect he was beginning to wonder even then. I gripped the list of control words in my hand, and listened as he went on.

"I planned to trick you into giving me that first prize of fifteen million dollars. I have succeeded. Only the test remains. You will have to give that money to my agent, Blake Wallace, to fill the terms of your promise.

"He is to use the money to build clinics of proper size on Mars and fitted to inject my drug into *all* who die. It will not affect a *true* corpse, but it will restore to life at once any unfortunate person who is afflicted by *false* death.

"I feel that in tricking you, by matching wits with you, I have done humanity a great service.

"In conclusion, let me assure you that the drugs that I have injected into my body were necessary for the success of the rather macabre experiment. There will be no need for you to use the revival drug on my body. I will be, as I sit before you, a *true* corpse. Let there be no doubt of it. Let my body be tested by all methods to determine this fact.

"The remainder of this venture rests in the hands of Blake Wallace. He has the tools that will control your robot."

James Trumble put the letter down. There was something in his eyes. Horror, perhaps, but also a vast tribute for a man who would kill himself so that others might live. I guess Trumble knew then. I know I did, and I had a horrible task ahead. I'd go through with it for Shad's sake. Wherever Gloria was, whatever she was doing, I knew that she could have only a deep love for the old man.

I looked at the sheets of paper I held in my hand. The first word was familiar. I had heard it from Peter Shad's lips that night in his room. I took a deep breath. I didn't wait for Trumble to approve of what was to take place.

I said: *"Rela."*

It was the Martian word meaning *move forward.*

Peter Shad's lifeless corpse jerked suddenly to attention. I felt a shudder go up my spine. I couldn't do it. I couldn't force a corpse to move, yet the body moved forward in the chair.

I was only the instrument to control Shad's great brain.

I said: "Twan—*stop.*"

The corpse stopped short and froze in rigidity. I heard the custom's officer gasp and saw the look of horror on Trumble's face.

"Look," I said, "this isn't fair to you. It isn't fair to him."

Trumble looked at me steadily.

"Young man," he said, "you have a job to perform. I have a duty. Proceed."

With shaking hands, I held the list of control words. I mumbled the word: *"Steepa"*—or stand up.

The body of Peter Shad arose stiffly, every joint forcing itself to work, every limb rigid.

"Rela."

The corpse shuffled forward and hit the desk before I could cry out the command: "Twan."

I looked down the long list. There were many words there, with their

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meanings all written after them.

I said to Trumble:

"Paper and pencil."

He produced them.

"Twists-fara-squn-atter-port."

"Figure the distance from the door to the desk."

THE slim fingers grasped the pencil and started to write. There was no hesitation, no study of the problem. I arose and went to the desk. There were words and figures on the paper.

"I figure 8½ feet, with 1/100 inch allowed for expansion due to weather."

I pushed the paper toward Trumble. I moved mechanically myself now. I was so full of mixed terror and horror for what I was forced to do that I couldn't speak myself. I was glad that Gloria wasn't present.

"Tell him," Trumble said, "to estimate the number of robots in my employ. Tell him he will use these production figures from my plants. They give the number of robot parts made in the past month. The month should be multiplied by one million to get the figure for the years in question."

I searched for a long time and jotted down the right command words. During that time, the custom's inspector stared out of the window. Trumble averted his eyes from the rigid humble looking thing that stood waiting. At last I was ready, I asked for the estimate.

It came quickly, spoken from dead lips. Trumble gasped.

"I think," he said, "that Peter Shad has outwitted me. I am ready to admit that he has earned his money, and God bless his memory, for the fine thing he has done."

He stared straight at Peter Shad's corpse. He did a strange thing. I think by then he was too numb to feel fear or horror. He grasped the dead, stiffened hand and squeezed it.

"I shake hands," he said in a hushed voice, *"with a most perfect creation, a Human Robot."*

I think I, as well as the readers of this account, knew from the first that we would find Gloria Williams in that casket. There was an explanation there also, written by Peter Shad's hand, and it was read in the privacy of James Drake Trumble's office, after Peter Shad's body had been taken away to a more fitting place. I destroyed the key words in Trumble's presence, so that never again would Peter Shad, Human Robot, be forced to rise from death at a spoken command.

Peter Shad wrote these words, and I read them to Trumble and to a prominent earth doctor on Trumble's staff:

"I, Peter Shad, realize that I can revive Gloria Williams tonight before my trip to earth begins. Should I do so, she will be frightened and may betray my secret in a moment of fear.

"I love my granddaughter dearly. She is the one person I live for. I keenly regret that I have never been able to make her happy. She is in love with my agent, Blake Wallace. It was through her that I learned how valuable Wallace would be to me. I watched them alone, and knew him as an honorable, upright man.

"I would not leave her body untouched, for I examined her on the night she died. Her death was caused by shock, when she learned that I intended to die to help others. An examination proved that hers was not true death, but of the type mentioned in my earlier communication.

"I had no choice but to bring her to earth, carefully cared for, so that she could come to no harm.

"The capsule of my drug, contained in this coffin, will revive her and estab-

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lish to everyone my sincerity and faith in it to revive the false dead. It should be handled by a competent doctor, according to my instructions."

The instructions followed, and I skipped them for the present, later giving them to the man in charge. The letter closed:

"I have removed from this coffin, the alarm whistles used in present day burial methods. They will not be needed, for I hope to spend the ages in this resting place, after my granddaughter has been removed from it.

"May God bless my children and forgive me for tricking an honest man, to obtain part of his fortune.

Peter Shad"

The brilliantly lighted perfection of the modern operating room was a far cry from Trumble's office. I watched them give Gloria the drug and I sat by her side after she revived, telling her as honestly as I could what had happened. She cried some, but I think she knew how Peter Shad would feel about that. She soon dried her tears.

JAMES DRAKE TRUMBLE was in his office when we were ushered in. He shook hands with Gloria. He had regained some of his composure since he last saw me, and so did I. Peter Shad was buried on Long Island, and there was a tall shaft of marble marking his grave.

"You've changed some since I saw you last, young lady," he said.

Gloria nodded and held my hand tightly. She had a right to hold it in front of the whole world. We were married now. Had been married a total of two hours. I felt quite possessive about the whole thing.

"You know," I told Trumble, "you've cared for Peter Shad's body and given him a fine burial. We have talked everything over. It isn't fair to force you to live up to that promise."

Trumble looked hurt.

"Are you returning to Mars?"

Gloria said:

"We're going directly to Venus. My husband has purchased a small place there. It's to be our home."

She said it proudly.

Trumble nodded. His eyes twinkled.

"Then I'll send my check direct to the Martian branch of the Bank of United Planets. The medical staff of my Martian hospital has been notified of what has happened. They are ready to start work on a hundred clinics. I will take pride in carrying on Peter Shad's work."

I wanted to thank him, but words choked me.

"Then," Gloria said gratefully, "my grandfather's work will be carried on?"

Trumble nodded.

He started writing a check. It was for a vastly larger sum than Peter Shad had demanded.

THE END

MONUMENT TO NOTHING

By JUNE LURIE

THE Monument to Nothing stands in Vienna, Austria. It was built in approximately 1835 by Alfred the Good. Although Alfred was a kind ruler and did much good for his subjects, he was a hypochondriac. He kept imagining that he had all sorts of ailments. One day he decided he was going blind, so he went to his family doctor. The doctor, not wishing to disagree with so illustrious a man, allowed that he was losing his sight. He prescribed a medication with a long Latin name which really meant "white nothing." Alfred used this medicine, and not losing his sight, was so grateful that he had a monument built of white stone in honor of the miraculous cure.

* * *

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DELUGE LEGEND OF INDIA

By H. R. STANTON

INDIA gives us an account of the deluge which, by its poverty, strikingly contrasts with that of the Bible and the Chaldeans. It has been translated for the first time by Max Muller.

One morning water was brought for washing to Manu, and when he had washed himself, a fish remained in his hands, and it addressed these words to him: "Protect me, and I will save thee." "From what wilt thou save me?" "A deluge will sweep all creatures away; it is from this that I will save thee." "How shall I protect thee?" The fish replied, "While we are small we run great dangers, for fish swallow fish. Keep me at first in a vase; when I become too large for it, dig a basin to put me into. When I have grown still more, throw me into the ocean; then I shall be preserved from destruction." Soon it grew to be a large fish. It said to Manu, "The very year I shall have reached by full growth the Deluge will happen. Then build a vessel and worship me. When the waters rise, enter the vessel, and I will save thee." After keeping him in this manner, Manu carried the fish to the sea. In the year indicated, Manu built a vessel and worshipped the fish. And when the deluge came he entered the vessel. Then the fish came swimming up to him, and Manu fastened the cable of the ship to the horn of the fish by which means the latter made it pass over the Mountain of the North. The fish said, "I have saved thee; fasten the vessel to a tree that the water may not sweep it away while thou art on the mountain; and in proportion as the waters decrease thou shall descend." Manu descended with the waters, and this is what is called the Descent of Manu on the Mountain of the North. The deluge had carried away all creatures, and Manu remained alone.

All the countries except Egypt seem to have their own Deluge myths. The explanation to this singular omission is very plain. The Egyptians had preserved in their annals the history of the destruction of Atlantis, out of which all the flood legends grew; and as they told all others, there had been no universal flood, but only local catastrophes. Possessing the real history of the local catastrophe which destroyed Atlantis, they did not indulge in any myths about a universal deluge covering the mountain tops of all the world.

The traditions of the early Christian ages touching the Deluge, pointed to the quarter of the world in which Atlantis was situated.

* * *

SHADE TREES

By JON BARRY

BANYAN trees grow in Ceylon and India, and they are the world's largest shade trees. One tree looks almost like a forest in itself. The banyan starts out like any tree with only one trunk, but as the limbs grow out, roots fall from them to the ground. After a time these roots grow down into the ground, and there becomes a trunk like growth between the limb and the ground. One of the largest banyan trees is in Calcutta. It has more than 3,000 trunks, and covers a quarter of a square mile. Thousands of people could have a picnic at one time under this tree. The name "banyan" comes from the Indian word meaning "merchant." Years ago merchants used to set up their wares under the banyan trees. It is worshipped by the Hindus, and they regard it as the Buddhists hold the bo-tree. The banyan grows to be only about seventy feet high, but the main trunk may be fourteen feet in diameter. When the main trunk decays the limbs are still held up by the smaller and yet powerful trunks.

ANCIENT BIRDS

By CAL WEBB

AMONG the ancient birds there was one called "Hesperornis" which in Greek language means Western Bird. A skeleton of one of these birds was found in the chalk beds of Kansas. It shows that it had teeth and from the size of its leg bones, it probably had strong muscles used for swimming. Its body was five feet long. It had only small bones where you'd expect it to have large wing bones. It probably wasn't much of a flying bird, but more expert in the water.

In the early 1800s a traveler in Madagascar reported that the natives were cutting eggs in two and using them for bowls. These eggs were laid by High Birds which are now extinct. Their eggs were thirteen inches long. One shell could hold six ostrich eggs or one hundred forty-eight hen's eggs.

In the last century the natives of New Zealand reported a giant bird living in the mountains that had the head of a man and trampled people to death. White men were never able to find such a bird, but they did find the skeleton of a bird ten feet high. This was the now extinct Moa.

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FLIGHT INTO FOG

by LEE FRANCIS

Catastrophe came to the Martian satellite, Monoon, that fateful day, in the form of a dreaded *fog*—and it was up to Bradd to save his people . . .

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The gun blasted a stream of fire and death, and cries of pain filled the air . . .

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ON THE satellite Monoon, which hugged greedily to the Master Planet, Mars, catastrophe struck suddenly. No one could tell how it happened or from whence it came. The new enemy, powerful, murderous, was fog.

Fog drifted down in vast, billowing clouds, covering the lowlands where the shepherds tended their *sheed.* Fog spread slowly, mushrooming across the valleys and into the villages on the hill-tops. The people were at first puzzled, then dismayed. They didn't understand this strange blanket of moisture which hid their sunlit pastures. The fog crept into crude shacks, killing the heat of their stoves. Cold with panic, they huddled together. The old ones felt fog in their bones, and died. The *Youngers,* prayed to Veesa, God of Light.

Among them were a few who dared plan ahead. People who read occasionally and knew that there were other places to which they might flee. They gathered in the darkness of the moist night and planned to leave the desolate, death-touched valleys.

Foremost among them was Bradd, son of Bradd the Elder, wise man of the valleys. Tall, sturdily built, with a determined look on his plain well-tanned face, he addressed those he planned to lead to safety.

"It is the Lords who do this to us," he told them. Old men listened with glistening eyes. Young men were there, and women and children, listening in the flickering light beneath the *sheed* stable. The fog paused outside the earth cave, held at bay by the fires. It hung there, waiting, until they must go out again and feel the wet fingers of death against their cheeks.

"The Lords live in the highlands," Bradd said. His face was dark in the uncertain light. He seemed taller, for the shadow of him on the wall was huge. "The Lords demand our flocks. We have refused to deliver them. This wet stuff—this stuff that blinds us, has been sent by them for punishment. What shall we do?"

Old people shook their heads. The *Youngers* were puzzled. Some of them thought they knew the point that Bradd was trying to get across. Their eyes sparkled. Their fists clenched.

"We shall march to the highlands," Bradd shouted. "We will take up our weapons against the Lords, and punish them for what they are doing to us."

It was a pitiful meeting, that gathering under the *sheed* stable. Bradd's learning was little, and therefore a dangerous thing. He knew nothing of the Lords, except for the fat agent who rode through the valleys each year, collecting bounty. He knew nothing of the power of the Lords.

Across the lowlands of Monoon, to the shepherds and the hunters and trappers, went the word. Bradd had declared war, and they came to him swiftly, for he was powerful and well liked. His word was accepted at its face value.

The hunters left their fog bound forests and came with cross-bows and spears. The herdsmen came, driving their *sheed* into the community stables, gathering for the march.

The day came.

GREER the Herdsman, henchman of Bradd the Younger, stood beside the village well. He strained his eyes in the dimness of the white screen, to see even a tenth of the men who had gathered. Greer's heavy red beard was shining with moisture. His heavy, even teeth were clenched together. He brought his hunting club down forcefully against the rock wall of the well.

"How many have come?"

This was Greer's task, for he had

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been appointed second in command, under Bradd.

Voices rose until everyone in the town it seemed, and some beyond the town, were shouting to each other. Then came the answering voice.

"Enough! Nine legions or more. Ten perhaps. Enough to drive the Lords from their carriages."

Bradd the Younger climbed the stone wall, and with feet braced wide apart, shouted out into the murk.

"Good! We will go at once. Enough women will go to herd the *sheed*. When we leave the valleys, we will plan our battle. Stout hearts are needed. No one will turn back. Our lands are lost. *We will take new lands.*"

Greer was at Bradd's side. With a mighty was cry, he summoned them to follow him. He brandished his war club, feeling in it an extra strength. A strength that would lead them to victory.

"We will tear riches from the hands of the fat Lords," he cried. "We will be flooded with good things, and then it will be the Lords who suffer."

A little awed, still frightened of the fog, they marched from their homes. Pitifully prepared, they went to meet they knew not what.

Laralee, daughter of Yuan the Mighty, came in quickly from the fog drenched garden. She tossed aside the great-coat and wrapped her slim body in the silken colors of the house. The robe was a sheen of rainbow hues, hugging tightly to her body. She wandered slowly through the house, to pause finally by the library door. She heard her father's voice.

"It is a terrible situation, Yuan was saying. "These poor people, several thousands of them, came from the lowlands. They blamed us for the fog. They came with spears and clubs to overcome and punish us. I cannot blame them."

"But now that they are here? Surely they see that we are suffering as they are? Will they go back?"

Curiosity overcame Laralee. She slipped inside the library and waited quietly. Yuan was discussing an important situation, indeed, she thought. His companion was Lenna, the Thinker. Lenna's white beard made him appear to be a hundred years old. He was respected and sought after by those who needed council. She listened.

Yuan was shaking his head.

"They cannot go back. The fog is even worse there. They are already ill. They would all die if they were forced to return to their homes."

Lenna nodded.

"Then the problem must be solved at one," he agreed. "We will open the Temple of Veesa to them. They must be fed and given warm lodgings, at least until this accursed fog lifts."

Laralee shuddered.

Accursed fog.

Would it *ever* lift? Would it ever leave them? They planned to open the Temple of Veesa, Bringer of Light, and let these people go there with flocks and their filth. Veesa had not responded to their prayers. Veesa had been spurned, forgotten.

"Father," she called softly. "May I come in?"

Both the old men were startled by her voice. Lenna the Thinker arose and Yuan followed his example. They waited until she seated herself beside the fire.

"You are in time to hear important news," Lenna said gravely. "A horde of shepherds has come from the valleys. The fog has driven them from their homes. They came, thinking we were to blame. They sought to murder us for the deed."

Her father broke in hurriedly.

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"When they saw that the fog was here also," he added, "they realized their mistake. They have asked our forgiveness and asked us for lodgings."

She smiled softly.

"And being two very fine men, you have decided to open the Temple of Veesa for them."

Both men looked guilty.

"They can do no harm," Yuan said quickly.

She shook her head.

"On the contrary, they will do good. I shall go there tomorrow and try to help them. Perhaps, if they understand the problem we face, they will be able to help us."

LENNA the Thinker chuckled. There was bitterness in the sound.

"I'm afraid, child," he said slowly, "that where great minds have failed, there is little material of value among the shepherds. They are not noted for their fine brains. Brawn, rather, is the one thing they are blessed with."

Laralee looked thoughtful.

"Even brawn has its place," she said, "if it is directed in the proper channels."

She arose, bowed respectfully to each of them and left the room. After she had gone, Yuan smiled at his old friend.

"This is harder for the very young," he said. "She hates the fog as we do, but it does things to her mind and soul that do not trouble you and I. We are almost old enough to welcome the wet blanket of death which closes quietly about us."

Lenna nodded.

"But she is like a flame, eager, vibrant and ready to experience life. It is a shame that life should be snatched away before it has had time to live."

They sat for a long time, watching the wisps of white that snatched at the windows, rusting away the dura-steel latch, sucking at the metallic fasteners that held the dura-glass in place.

"It will eat its way through everything, as it eats at men's souls," Lenna said softly.

"It will if we cannot stop it," Yuan agreed. He arose and stood stiff, his fists clenched, mouth shaped into hard, white lines. "We *must* stop it."

"First find the cause," Lenna recited. "The remedy will then be forthcoming."

Laralee drew her cape closely about her. The huge doors, now open before her, always brought panic into her heart. Here was the Temple of Veesa. Every fortnight, during the days of sun, she had come here to worship at the fire-shrine. She had tossed her bit of oil-soaked reed on the altar and watched it add one more flicker to the roaring flame.

She had kneeled before the altar and repeated quietly, ever since her lips could form the words:

"Veesa, Bringer of Light, continue to smile on us and we will nurse your flame with our souls."

All that was gone now. Today the fire was out, and the altar was but a square smoke-blackened rock, hated and spat upon by Veesa's worshippers. The fog had come and Veesa had been called upon. Veesa had failed them.

THE Temple had not changed greatly. The stone seats were still here, but the people who occupied those seats were poor shepherds and hunters. She saw fires burning on the floor of the Temple, and smelled the rich odor of cooking flesh. She heard the sound of many voices, arguing and fighting. Here was the throng of ill-clothed shepherds her father had spoken about. Eyes turned upon her and she felt frightened and hot as they stared. She was glad she had chosen to wear the plain robe

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of wool. Glad because here were people clad only in the rough skins of *sheed* and wild animals.

The men were dark, tanned and muscular.

Laralee went down the long stairway toward them. She knew that guards were hidden on the balconies above, and was glad that they were there. Their long-range electro-pistols were ready, just in case.

She had planned to speak to these people. To help them. How?

Now that she was here, only a few troubled themselves to look at her a second time. They went back to their food, tearing flesh with their teeth, stuffing red hunks of meat into their mouths. Suddenly she was sick. Disgusted with this crew of—of animals.

A man was moving toward her. His hair was long and clean. He was very young. There was something in his dark, flashing eyes that disturbed her. She tried to evade his stare. She stood still, waiting. She had to admire the strong, muscular body. Somehow Laralee pitied him, for he looked more like Lord than shepherd, save for the poor skins that hung about his waist.

He hesitated barely three feet from her, smiled, and said:

"I am Bradd the Younger."

His voice was young and friendly.

She had to smile. A nice introduction, she thought, without a word wasted.

"I am Laralee."

Bradd smiled.

"That is a nice name," he said. "What are they going to do to help us?"

The question made her suddenly angry. Had not the Lords given these people food—warm lodgings?

"Surely you have received enough help. What more . . . ?"

He shrugged.

"We have always supported the Lords," he said simply. "Without us, there would be no meat, no clothing. Monoon has lived by our labor. Now we cannot labor, and we deserve part of the reward already in the hands of the Lords."

She hadn't expected to meet keen-eyed young men like this—this Bradd. She had been told that the shepherds were dull, zombie-like people who did not trouble themselves to think. She admired him, yet she feard him, for he was the type who made trouble.

"I think," she said stiffly, "that you are ungrateful. You arrived in the worst possible condition. You have been fed and clothed. You will have a home here as long as you need it."

"We want more," he answered calmly. "We want an explanation for the fog that has snuffed life from our valleys. We blamed the Lords for its coming. Now we find that they are not to blame, and we seek the true cause. We deserve a place among the Lords, and want our people to sit in their council."

Laralee's eyes flashed. Bradd saw deep violet eyes, full of sudden fire.

"You demand a great deal."

His eyes never wavered from hers. Suddenly there was a broad smile on his face, and he looked very brave and handsome.

"We *expect* much," he said, "for we are free people. A crisis must be met. We will help meet it. In turn, we demand equality."

She had listened too long. Laralee whirled and walked away from him without a word. She went upward toward the massive doors, without looking back. She fancied she could hear them mocking her. Let them rot in the Temple.

Laralee didn't care. That young man dreamed of power. She would see that his dreams never came true.

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At the doors, she paused and looked back. She hated herself for doing it, but the urge was too great.

Bradd was standing where she had left him. His arm was upraised in a salute to her and the smile was broad on his face. Suddenly an intense desire came over her to return the parting gesture.

Disgusted at her weakness, she ran out into the fog without another look. She had the impression that she had been about to make a fool of herself.

MONTRO had been the greatest city on Monoon. Conditions were no better here. The fog spread until it covered Monoon. It seeped into the highest towers. It sank to the deepest cellar.

Gradually fog came to have a new meaning to the people. It was a monster which hung in ghostly sheets over everything. No man had seen the suns for months. No man could fly upward to safety, for space traffic, blinded and shrunken to rust, was forbidden.

Montro became a city of shivering souls. The Council of Thinkers, led by Lenna, called meeting after meeting to no avail. No one could suggest a means of controlling such an enemy.

Men went mad, for the destiny of Monoon was in space traffic, and no one could communicate with the Master Planet, Mars. Monoon was doomed. Days, weeks, and finally, the tenth moon came and passed. At times the twin suns made odd rainbows through the gloom. It was then that hearts beat fast and hopes were high. Always the rainbows went away and the fog closed down tighter than ever. The fog would not give up it's prey.

Fog had long since rusted the delicate wires of the communication systems. It made a thick, ugly scum of rust over all metals. It grounded all space fleets, for moisture had been unknown on Monoon, and men were not ready for it.

On the tenth day of the celebration of the God, Veesa, new hope came in the fact that Strawn, Prince of Montro, promised to speak to his people. Strawn was well loved and very powerful. A few kind words from the great Prince, and the people could go on a little longer, ignoring the grip that the fog had on their bodies.

Those who listened to the few rado-screens still in existence, were doomed to disappointment. Prince Strawn did not speak. He should have appeared at ten to sun, or ten minutes before the second sun hung directly above the city.

The program was interrupted from time to time while last minute preparations were being made. Then, when Strawn was to speak, the announcer was forced to speak in his place.

"We are forced to announce that his Majesty's speech will be delayed. You will hear him later in the day . . ."

Men drew their clothing tightly about them and spoke in whispers on street corners. Some whispered that the Prince had failed them. Others were more loyal.

"Never fear," they said. "He will speak."

Then, over the same rado-screens, came the voice. The voice that some said they recognized. Others were not so anxious to admit their thoughts.

The voice "jammed" all broadcasts. It came from no-where. It said:

"Why doesn't Prince Strawn speak? Why doesn't Prince Strawn speak?"

Startled men stared at each other, asking silent questions. From lip to lip went the word. Who had asked that question?

Some thought they knew. It sounded

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like . . .

No—it could not be . . .

Yet?

"WE CANNOT understand who jammed the broadcast," rado-screen officials said. "Obviously it was not the Prince's voice, for he is at the palace. He will appear later."

There were those who thought the strange voice on the rado-screen *did* belong to the Prince. What matter of trickery was this?

Nerves were on edge. Each time the voice came, and it came often in the next few hours, people listened intently. At last they gathered before the palace.

The gates were locked. They could not see beyond them, through the curtain of white mist. Alarmed, they at last broke through the gates and swarmed into the palace itself. The Prince was not there. His entire staff was missing. Not even a kitchen maid remained to explain the mystery.

At night, when the fog was untinted by the suns, people gathered in frightened groups and gibbered like strange, bewildered animals. Intelligent men broke down and cried to the ancient Gods for help. Guns were fired in the squares, to dispel the evil fog. In a few hours, a super-modern city had changed into a bewildered hodge-podge zoo of human beasts.

Yet, throughout the entire night that followed, the voice kept coming to them.

"Why doesn't Prince Strawn speak?"

At last, driven mad by the strain of waiting, a man arose in the Temple of Veesa and cried aloud:

"Why doesn't he speak? Listen and I will tell you. He *does* speak, and he is driving us insane. He has betrayed us and is in league with the Godless power that ruins us. He has betrayed Monoon and is seeking now to destroy his people."

When it was said, others agreed. Others realized that the man had spoken the words they feared to say aloud.

Monoon became a huge, dying beast, cornered by fear, awaiting the death blow. Monoon, cut off from the satellite system, forgotten by the Master Planet —Mars, left to die.

Bradd the Younger was disgusted. He was not witless, as were so many of his henchmen. He worried about the girl, Laralee. He knew now that she was the daughter of Yuan, a very powerful man in Montro. He knew also that only her pride had kept her from coming to him again.

He had been forced to stand by and watch a city go mad. Bradd was not ignorant. He thought clearly and sensibly. He allowed no superstition to cloud his mind. During his life, he had learned much by observation.

He sat alone now, watching his people. The Temple of Veesa was filled with the stench of cooking flesh and filthy bodies. His people had given up, even as the Lords had given up. They refused to fight. There was nothing—no one—to fight.

Bradd tried to plan. It was obvious that few were left who even tried to think.

First, he thought, he knew little of Prince Strawn.

It was quite obvious that if Strawn were so well loved by his people, he must be a man of decent character. Second—if he had *planned* to flee, there was no point in his taking along his entire household staff.

No space ship—at least of the Monoon fleet, had left the satellite for months. The guards had told him that. Their instruments were rusted beyond repair. Only a few were in condition

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to fly, and they were accounted for and locked where the fog could not reach them.

If Strawn had left Monoon, *an outsider had come for him.*

An outsider, equipped to fly through the fog and having knowledge of the prevailing conditions.

Then—were there enemy forces? Were human minds controlling the fog? Was the fog a curse, not of the Gods, but sent here by a group of people who wished to destroy Monoon?

The people of the western slopes of Mars could see Monoon. Why hadn't they sent assistance?

Bradd swore softly. There, he suspected, was his answer. But other men—men like Yuan and Lenna, had probably already drawn the same conclusion, and been unable to do anything about it.

He looked down at his poorly clad body.

"Skins," he said. "Wild man—untrained. You have a poor brain, Bradd. A brain untrained. A body that is strong, but useless you know, for you can't see what you are fighting."

LARALEE sat tensely in the tiny room, her hair combed out long and shining against her shoulders. At the first tiny sound, her hands had become motionless. The hair-brush was clenched between bloodless fingers. She drew her robe over bare shoulders. Her face in the mirror was very pale.

Could it have been water, dripping against the stone wall outside her window?

She thought not. The footstep, for she was sure she had heard them, had been clearly audible, as though they came from her bedroom.

She couldn't sit here forever, waiting. She stood up and stepped silently over the threshold. Standing near the window, erect and un-smiling, was Bradd the Younger. All the fear drained out of her. She could not be alarmed at his pretense; she could not pretend fear, even to herself.

"You?" She put mock anger in her voice.

"I'm sorry I had to come like this," he said "I need your help."

His words made her heart swell with pride. Here was a man who thought her capable of being something beside beautiful. Someone who depended on her.

"How did you get here? The guards are outside."

A tiny smile grew around his lips.

"We evaded the guards," he said simply. "It was easy—in the fog. I saw you pass this window some time ago. I climbed the wall."

He was so cool and capable that he frightened her. He had said he climbed the wall. Forty feet up, with only rough, wet stones to cling to.

"Wait," she said, and walked across the room. She slipped the bolt in the door. In her heart, she could find only admiration and trust for the man. Strength and goodness seemed a part of Bradd the Younger.

"Now," she came quickly back to him. "Why have you come here?"

"I need your help." He had said that before, and it puzzled her. "I must have proper clothing. I must have a uniform of the Monoon army.

She frowned.

"Before I help you, I must know what wild scheme you plan. After I hear your story, there isn't the remotest chance of me getting a uniform for you. It would be treason, especially after the wild thoughts you expressed to me the last time we met."

He sobered.

"I have no plan to harm Monoon," he said. "I seek to save Monoon."

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She tossed her head.

"How do I know I can trust you?"

He grasped her elbows, holding her at arm's length.

"There is no time for doubt," His voice was grim. "Monoon is going through a death struggle. In a few weeks it will die. I believe I have thought out the problem as an intelligent man should. But I am not schooled in details, and I need a guide—an assistant. Will you help me save Monoon?"

She made no attempt to escape him. Her eyes were attracted to his as though she were a bird in the grip of a cobra. Yet, there was nothing in him that she feared. She could see only honest determination.

"If I do not trust you? If I call the guards?"

He shrugged.

"Greer and I have fought side by side before. We can fight again."

Her eyes widened.

"Greer?"

A huge man slipped from behind the drapes near the window. His chest, bare to the waist, was a forest of curly red hair. His arms and legs were knotted with muscles, and he carried a huge, spiked war club. Only the torch of red hair on his head, gave away the clown in Greer. Otherwise, his face was sober and brooding. He had gone again, as suddenly as he had come. Only the gently waving curtain gave away his presence in the room.

"Sit down," Laralee said quietly. "I must know your plan."

Bradd sank slowly into the chair. She stood stiffly before him, tense, waiting.

HE STARTED to tell her his innermost thoughts. How, as a boy, he had longed to make Monoon a better place in which to live. How he wanted to see all men share alike. As he talked, his expression became that of an eager school boy. She could see him when he was younger, groping eagerly for knowledge. Gradually he had made whole cloth from the facts his mind sought out.

"I cannot explain why I feel as I do," he said. "I'm sure that Prince Strawn would not desert his people. I want to find the source of this trouble, and I think that I can do it. I need you, for you are clever, and can fill in the places where my knowledge does not bridge the gap. In the name of those who have died, and will die, you cannot refuse to help me."

He had been talking for a long time. As he talked, Laralee had gone down on her knees at his feet, her eyes lifted to his. Her lips were parted slightly, wonderingly. Greer came slowly from behind the drapes and stared at Bradd. His club hung limply in his hand.

Laralee rose to her feet.

"Wait," she said. "My father has a uniform which he has been unable to wear for many years. I wish to speak to him."

Bradd started forward.

"You will not betray us?"

She put her small hand in his.

"You are safe as long as you trust me," she said simply. "You are young, but I think you will some day be a great man."

Before he could say more, she was gone, locking the door behind her. Bradd sat down, staring at the carpet. His mind was so full that his head ached.

"She is a good woman," Bradd said.

"Very good," Greer answered. "You have chosen well."

Bradd nodded.

"We are fortunate, you and I, to have the help of such a person."

Yuan the Mighty stood at attention, his arm raised in salute. Then, regard-

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ing Laralee with reproach, he let his arm drop to his side and chuckled.

"The stranger makes a handsome officer," he said. "For a moment he fooled me, even though I should have recognized my own uniform."

THE uniform *did* fit the shepherd well. It served as proper adorment to the broad shoulders, sinewy waist and long, muscled legs. The red cap, covered with gold braid, looked very business like atop his well shaped head. He stood straight, his face solemn, for to him this was no masquerade. This day could mark the beginning of his career—or—the end of it.

"You and your daughter have been kind," he said. "Greer, and I, Bradd the Younger, have put ourselves in your hands. She told us you wished to speak to us both. We know that your power is great and we hope you fully understand our sincerity."

"Sit down," Yuan said, and motioned to half dozen deep, comfortable chairs that surrounded his desk. He seated himself, never taking his eyes from the tall youth.

Laralee moved behind her father, placing her hands lovingly on his shoulders.

"Laralee told me that you suspected the fog has been manufactured by some enemy group, to destroy us."

Bradd nodded.

"I come from a simple people," he said. "I am not clever. I have, however, questioned the fog from the first. Monoon is a dry place. Never has the fog come before. Coupled with the fact that we receive no assistance or word from the outside, this indicates that someone, somewhere knows of our plight and does not want to help us."

Yuan nodded.

"We have thought of that," he said. "Go on."

Bradd colored slightly.

"I know that Monoon is cut off from the planetary system. Monoon is important only to the dwellers on the western slope of Mars. It is visible only from that point. Therefore, I believe that the source of our trouble lies there."

Greer cleared his throat and looked amazed.

Yuan said: "You seem to possess certain knowledge."

"My father, Bradd the Elder, was once banished from the Court of Lords," he said. "I have not always been a shepherd. Once I dwelt in halls like these."

Before they could interrupt, he continued hurriedly.

"Because Monoon is off the trade routes, only the dwellers of the western slopes would know of our plight. Those traders have been shrewd and lawless. It would be to their advantage to let us die. Then Monoon and its riches would be theirs."

Yuan nodded.

"Suppose I have guessed that for some time. With our communication system lost and our fleet grounded, how can we contact the other colonies? We are out of sight-range. Others know very little about us."

Bradd shrugged.

"What can we lose? The fog *could* be natural. No one can prove that it isn't unless the scource is discovered."

"What is your theory about the absence of the Prince?"

Bradd shrugged.

"I don't know. I would guess that the Prince and his entire staff were spirited away to frighten us still more. To break down our last bit of morale."

"And if we find Prince Strawn, we find the source of our trouble?"

Bradd nodded.

The room was silent. Greer was

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studying Bradd with admiring eyes. Greer would follow the youth straight to hell, if Bradd could find a way. There was no explanation for Laralee's emotions. Her eyes were misty and far away. For the first time, she was deeply impressed by a man.

Yuan, also, was very thoughtful. Many of the Lords had spoken of these things, but none of them wished to follow through in an attempt to prove their theory.

"How," asked Yuan, "are we to fight back? The ships are rusted. We cannot fly through the astroid belt in this fog. We would wreck ourselves blindly in this ugly, white blanket of death."

"That's exactly what I want to do," Bradd said. "Not wreck my ship—but suggest a manner of going through the astroid belt safely. Surely one of your friends has a ship that is in flying condition. I have heard that some of them, locked safely below ground, have escaped the fog."

Yuan shook his head.

"Such a wild chase is out of the question," he said firmly. "You have no idea who or what you are going to have to face, even if you did escape death among the astroids."

Laralee cried out suddenly.

"Father—I have it. We can use the Gray-ghost."

"The Gray-ghost is a sport-ship," Yuan said. "It supports no guns. No doubt it is in fair condition, being locked in the secret hangar as it is."

He looked thoughtful, then shook his head.

"No," he said. "It would be blasted from the sky."

"What is this ship?" Bradd asked. There was a new hope in his eyes.

"The Gray-ghost of Monoon," Laralee said eagerly. "It's my own ship. It is small and fast."

"MY DAUGHTER'S ship," Yuan explained. "She wanted to fly before restrictions were lited on woman flyers. She had been forbidden to touch the controls. She drove me almost mad, teasing me night and day to fly. I bought the Gray-ghost and painted it an 'illusion' white, which fades and changes with the colors of the void. She has kept it hidden since the fog came, but when the skies of Monoon were clear, she flew almost every day."

"And in a period of ten moons," Laralee said, "Not one army plane overtook me. They never found out who flew the *ghost* ship."

Bradd looked at the girl with new respect.

"Could you teach me to fly the Gray-ghost?"

She shook her head.

"Not in the fog. I tried to fly once." She shuddered. "Though I was only a few miles from the surface, I almost killed myself getting down. It is a hopeless task."

Bradd's eyes still gleamed.

"If the fog were not there?"

Yuan frowned.

"You speak in riddles," he said.

Bradd was excited now.

"When the first fog settled in the lowlands, the shepherds fought it. They found a strange reed in the swamps. When it burned, it dispelled the fog for several yards around. Perhaps we can discover the chemicals contained in those reeds."

"You can get some of them?"

Bradd arose.

"Some were brought here as torches. There are still a few."

Yuan was fascinated by the boundless ambition of the man before him.

"Bring the reeds to me," he said. "We will try."

"Bring the reeds here, Greer," Bradd

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said, and in a moment, Greer was gone.

Yuan said thoughtfully.

"My people would find great hope in knowing that something is being done."

"No," Bradd said sternly. "The first rule in war is that we remain silent. Traitors may be listening. If we fail, there will be no heart break. A few of us are not important."

Laralee didn't agree. To her, this man had become the most important person on Monoon. She wondered why he was rushing into a task that all the armies of Monoon were powerless to perform.

"This is amazing," Yuan said. "I cannot believe . . ."

They looked at the array of test tubes on the long table.

Bradd smiled.

"Then we are on the right track. We *know* the chemical content of the reed."

Yuan held a small test tube in his hand. It was sealed.

"Before these reeds dried, they absorbed a bit of strange swamp gas. It is a common type, yet in condensed form, it becomes powerful."

He drew a flash-stick from his pocket, opened the tube and ignited the gas. A blob of strange, white light sprang out of the tube and drifted toward the ceiling. It made the room brilliant with light.

"Perfect," Laralee breathed. Her hand was on Bradd's arm. "We can obtain a large amount of it from the reeds."

Yuan was quite happy.

"That's the odd part of it," he admidded. "We already have a huge supply."

"I don't understand?"

"Listen," Yuan addressed them all. "We use a gas for cleaning out the city sewers. Combine one tenth of this gas with the stock we now have, and we will obtain the same chemical content. I'll have men bring all these reeds they can obtain. The Council will release as many containers of the cleanser-gas as I wish. We'll be ready in a fortnight."

Greer was grinning delightedly.

"We will float up in a bubble of light," he said. "That alone will frighten Monoon's enemies. We have practically won our battle."

Yuan's face was sober once more.

"I'm afraid, Greer," he said, "that light has not won our battle. However, it has helped."

Bradd's lips tightened into straight lines.

"The remainder of the battle depends on Greer and me," he said.

THE people of Monoon heard strange news. They flocked to the streets and balconies, watching the strange white light in the sky. Yuan, in his own room, watched the light with a quiet prayer on his lips. He prayed not to Veesa, but to a newer, more powerful God that even he did not understand.

The city was bathed in the light. The fog had gone. Then, as the light lifted out of sight into the void, the fog came down again.

Some were sure that they saw a tiny gray speck in the midst of the light ball. Now the fog was down again over the satellite, and Monoon grieved, for its people had hopes that a miracle had happened, and they were free.

Had they known that the speck in the center of the light was a ship carrying a foolhardy young man aloft to an unknown destination, they would have cursed and said that this was another of Prince Strawn's tricks to frighten them. Instead, believing the

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light to be a symbol, they flocked to the Temple of Veesa and rebuilt the fire on the altar. There, mixed with the poorly garbed shepherds, they kneeled and prayed with a hope that had died, and been rekindled.

When the light was gone, Yuan rose and spoke aloud to the sky."

"Bring them back safely," he said. "They are our only hope."

Yuan still did not know to whom he spoke. There seemed to be a new and greater power lurking above him, listening to his words. He spoke to a force that he did not—could not—understand.

Bradd watched the control board in the tiny room aboard the Gray-ghost. He had learned to fly only by learning the control board and how it worked. This was the first time he had left the surface of the satellite.

The Gray-ghost was a thousand miles from Monoon now, yet the ball of light persisted, enveloping the ship in its center.

"I don't understand it," Bradd said, and scanned the viso-screens again. "When we were launched, the gas containers were lighted. I saw the light rise and keep the ship in its center."

Greer grinned. He was enjoying the trip.

"And a good job," he said. "Laralee was a good teacher. We escaped the reefs and the astroid belt. Now, it seems we captured that ball of light."

Bradd nodded. It was good to be in the light of the sun again. Below them, under that ring of white fog, lay Monoon. Still, even here where it was hardly visible, the light of the gas persisted, looked like pale silver around the Gray-ghost.

They waited patiently, knowing that little time would pass before they reached their goal. Bradd was well schooled in handling the Gray-ghost. He could have been flying for years, his knowledge of the simple instrument panel seemed so complete. Greer, staying near the forward viso-screens, was suddenly excited.

"A big planet," he cried out. "It's —very, very big."

Bradd hurried to his side.

"Mars," he said.

"It's a foolish thing we're doing," Greer offered. "A dangerous thing."

Bradd did not speak. He studied the open void ahead. He picked out mountain ranges, rising jaggedly from the western slope. Bradd was concerned in finding a place to land safely.

Below the cabin, a steady *knock—knock* sounded. It could be nothing serious, but gradually it worried Bradd. Steady, maddening. *Knock - knock - knock.*

Bradd was sure of his course now. He locked the controls.

"Something loose in the hold," he said. "Wait—I'm going down."

Greer went to the screen. Bradd opened the hatch and let himself down slowly into the dark hold beneath. It was cool and black down here. The hold was full of tanks. They held more of the light-gas. There were fire-guns strapped to the floor. A small arsenal of weapons was secured to the walls.

He moved cautiously. Something sprang at him from the darkness. Tensely, he threw his body forward, fingers closing like steel around the thing that attacked.

"Bradd—Bradd, you're choking me."

It was a breathless, feminine voice.

"Laralee?"

She was in his arms then, laughing, holding him tightly.

"Father wouldn't let me come. You didn't ask me. There was no other way, Bradd. I hated to be stowaway on my own ship."

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He cursed Yuan silently for letting his daughter escape from Monoon. Still, there was comfort in having her near him. Laralee could handle the ship better than he. She might be needed.

"Bradd?" She drew away from him. "Bradd, you're angry."

His answer was abrupt. He grasped her body and drew her to him roughly. His lips met hers and he pressed her face against his—savagely.

He heard her gasp, and felt her melt against him, responding to his caress.

She put her hand across her mouth when he was done, and he was glad that she couldn't see his face in the blinding darkness of the hold.

"We'd better go up to the control room," he said. He felt unsteady and not at all sure of himself.

"I DON'T understand," Laralee said in a mystified voice. "We are very fortunate. See, the light illuminates the entire canyon."

It was true. Bradd had chosen a deep Martian canyon as a landing place. They had plummeted down to the very bottom and the Gray-ghost rested on the rocky terrain.

The light did not reach here from above, and only the strange gas ball made the ugly, rocky hole visible to them. They had left the Gray-ghost and were exploring the place. Straight, forbidding cliffs rose upward a mile to the surface of the planet.

"I've tried to understand," Bradd said. "The gas must have a clinging quality that we failed to detect when we first used it. It can do no harm. It may help, as it has helped us in this dark hole."

Greer had left them, and walked away toward a cleft in the rocks. Suddenly Laralee cried out in amazement.

"Bradd—look at Greer."

Greer was almost out of sight, far into the cavern in the rocks. Yet, around his body like a shield, clung the bright light.

"The gas?" Bradd gasped. "Does it cling to everything it touches?"

They proved this to themselves.

"It may mean bad news," Bradd said. "We could be easily seen. We could not go about without being seen after dark."

He paused, then smiled.

"On the other hand," he said, "it may prove a blessing."

Laralee was puzzled.

"I don't understand?"

The smile grew more mysterious on Bradd's face.

"Wait a while," he urged. "You will find out."

Bradd the Younger had been studying the charts of Mars for a long time. Outside the Gray-ghost, night had fallen and they were in a lost, blind world. At last he rose. Greer had been waiting patiently. The giant's eyes were on Laralee. Above all else, Bradd had told him, he must protect the girl.

"I have an idea," Bradd said quietly. "I am leaving you both here for a while. I'll know in a short time if the plan will work."

Laralee eyed him sternly.

"I am going with you. You may need our help."

Bradd shook his head. There was a glint of humor in his eyes, but determination made his mouth hard.

"I go alone," he said. "I am able to take care of myself."

He moved to the hatch, opened it and went out into the night. Laralee started to follow. Greer blocked her way, sitting down on the floor before the hatch.

"He has commanded," Greer said. "We will stay."

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Laralee stamped her small foot angrily.

"You cannot order me about," she protested.

Greer ignored her.

"You—you are foolhardy and stubborn to let him go without us."

Greer shugged his shoulders.

"You would make a poor wife for a shepherd," he said. "You are accustomed to having your own way."

Laralee's face turned crimson.

"You—you . . ."

Greer turned away from her and stared through the glass at Bradd's figure as it grew to a small speck of light far down the canyon. Then Greer turned back to see Laralee, her face cushioned in her hands, crying as though her heart would break.

"Don't cry, woman," he said with rough tenderness. "Bradd the Younger will not break his neck. Men his age value their lives too highly to toss them away."

Nevertheless, Greer was greatly concerned over Bradd's safety. Yet he could not leave the girl. Greer shook his head slowly from side to side. He felt miserable. After a time, Laralee stopped crying and the cabin grew silent. Neither of them dared look at the other.

BRADD the younger hesitated on the crest of the hill, staring down into the Valley of Spara. He knew his way well, for he had studied the pic-o-maps of Mars. He recognized the dark outline of the blast furnaces, and the low outline of the town beyond. Here the miners lived, and died, digging and blasting wealth from the hills to turn over to the Lords. Here was the lowest form of slavery on Mars, where men and women were animals, kept in poverty and ignorance.

Spara was a violent place. It was a place where minds were stupid and death meant nothing. Perhaps, if he could pursue his plan, he might impress these slaves. It was upon their superstition that Bradd placed his faith.

He climbed slowly down into the valley, found a foot-path and followed it. He had gone hardly a hundred yards when he heard a sharp cry of fear ahead of him. Startled himself, he hesitated, then went on again. A dim figure ran ahead of him down toward the village.

Bradd realized that to these savages, he must be an awesome sight. The Monoon army uniform was alive with brilliant light. The light flowed around him, making his way easy in spite of the rough terrain.

Grimly, he loosened his fire pistol and prepared to fight if it became necessary. The circle of light would either win for him what he wished, or foretell his doom. Buildings loomed up before him and he walked down a rough street. The buildings were made of cemented slag, black and ugly as the furnaces and the hill-side. He reached the square, a large, bare spot in the center of the town. Thus far, not a soul had molested him. It was as though he had walked into a deserted crypt.

Taking a deep breath, he shouted:

"People of Spara, come forth and meet your God of Light."

He knew that Veesa was worshipped here as he was on Monoon. Would the light about his body be sufficiently impressive? Could he become a God to these poor people?

He waited several minutes. At first he thought that they would come in force to attack him. Then a small child, clad only in *sheed* wool, tottered out of a house and across the square toward him. Bradd waited. Evidently they trusted him, for he made no move-

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ment to go near the child. Men and women came from among the houses. He waited until at least a hundred of them were near enough for him to speak.

"Listen to me," he shouted. His voice echoed back to him from the walls of the valley. "Veesa is not angry at you. He is angry at the Lords who rule you. Veesa rules the light, and no man shall tamper with Veesa's domain."

They were leaning forward intently studying him. Their eyes were wide with wonder.

"Your Lords have caused a fog to settle down and envelope your sister nation, the satellite of Monoon. Veesa is angry because of this, and he seeks the Lords."

He paused, almost holding his breath. Greer had been right. This was the craziest thing he had ever done. He was pursuing a will-o'-the-wisp. If the fog was natural, then he was mad to ever consider coming here alone. Yet, he was sure that someone, somewhere on Mars, was causing it to happen.

The crowd moved restlessly. Some of them slipped back into the shadows. Swiftly he spoke his plea for help.

"Unless those who betrayed Monoon are captured and punished, I, Veesa, will cause a like fog to envelope this valley. I will make the furnaces die, and the sun hide itself. I will bring death to everyone in Spara."

A groan of terror came from the lips of those near him. They were sincere in their interest now, wanting to help him, struggling to please him. Sickly smiles were visible.

"Enough," Bradd roared. "I will go now, but when night comes again, I will return. By then, some one of you must talk to Veesa. You have a day in which to learn the secret of the Lords. I will expect much information from your lips. To the person who tells me most, there will be a great reward. If nothing is learned, then no one will escape my wrath."

He walked from the square and a wide path opened through the crowd. He went down the street and up the hill past the furnaces without once looking back. He was sure that he had a thousand eager slaves working for him now. He must hide in the hills. By night, some of them might have knowledge to offer that would help him greatly. He had to depend on that for the time being.

A grim smile touched Bradd's lips. He was high on the hill-side now, walking steadily upward. Suddenly out of nowhere, a boulder broke loose and lunged down toward him. Swiftly he dodged to one side, but his foot was caught beneath it and he fell, groaning with pain, and rolled over on his side.

The vague outline of a man ran down toward him. Before he could move, Bradd saw the fat, ugly face.

"So it's Veesa?" The voice had an ugly snarl to it. "Good Veesa, Bringer of Light, who is going to punish all the bad Lords in the valley."

Bradd fought his way to his knees, his eyes filmed with pain. He lunged out with both arms.

"Well, *Veesa.*" Thick arms went around him and forced him down. "You're a funny looking God now. Get up and float away, if you can. Otherwise you'll answer for those bold words you spoke down there. Come along, now, up with you."

The arms gripped tighter, twisting his body around and pulling him upright. Silently Bradd struggled, cursing the ankle that made him want to cry out in pain.

HE SAW the pistol in the fat man's hand, and tried to dodge as the

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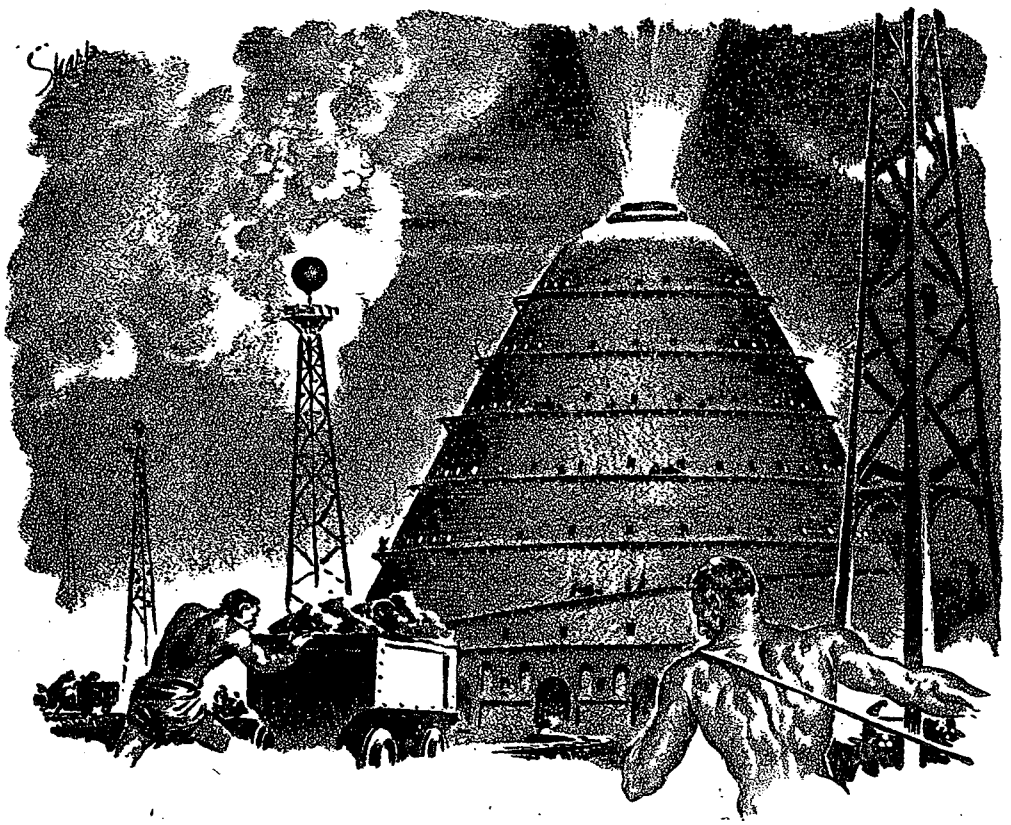

Men were stripped to their waists in feverish work all over the area . . .

butt came crashing down against his skull. Bradd sank to the ground again with a moan of pain.

"Fight back, will you, bogus God of Light?"

The big man lifted Bradd's limp body to his shoulder. He struggled across the rocky field to a road. His carriage was hidden in the shadows of a great boulder. He dumped Bradd into a box-like container at the rear of the carriage, and shouted up to the coachman.

"Away with you, and don't breathe a word of it to your friends. Death will be the penalty."

Only silence came from the coachman's seat. The coach faded into the night, and the rear compartment was made bright by the light that still clung to Bradd's body. A light that was beginning to fade, as does a bright cloak when it is worn too long.

Daylight drifted down into the canyon, touching the walls and making them a rusty brown. Laralee stirred from her sleep and lifted her head from her arms. Her face was very pale.

Greer sat cross-legged on the floor, near the hatch. His eyes were filmed with sleep as he looked up at the girl.

"Greer," she said, and her voice sounded strange and far away. "He should have come back hours ago."

Greer nodded. He arose and wandered to the porthole. He studied the grim, deserted floor of the canyon. Then he turned to Laralee.

"I think we will follow now," he said.

Laralee went into the tiny room adjoining the cabin, bathed her face and donned a small, white leather belt. She found a jet-pistol in the cabin and

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placed it carefully in the holster. When she spoke to Greer again, her voice was much more steady.

"We will find him. He has courage. Almost too much courage."

On the crest of the hill above the Valley of Spara, Greer and Laralee hesitated.

Laralee was exhausted, but she knew that she must go on as long as they could follow the trail left by Bradd in the pumice-like dust of the hills.

Greer knew little of this place. He had depended on Bradd. Without his young warrior friend, the grizzled fighter was lost.

"This is Spara," Laralee said. "Bradd came here. Perhaps he is a prisoner in the town. If we go there, they may harm us and they may not. We can learn nothing here, for the rocks and the hills cannot speak to us. We must question the people."

Greer shook his head.

"You wait here," he urged. "I will go down alone. Bradd would not be pleased if I allowed you to approach danger."

The girl shook her head.

"We will go together. The light still clings to us. Last night I dreamed that Bradd had come back and that he believed the light would protect us."

She had been thinking during those gray morning hours before she slept. Thinking that Bradd had planned to use the light, for he had acted strangely when he talked about it. Perhaps he had tried to frighten the people with it?

She started down the hill, picking her way over slag piles and among the huge furnaces. A pall of smoke hung above the valley. The place was like the ugly, red mouth of Hell, spewing up fire and filth.

Greer followed close behind her, ready to kill at her command. They entered the town, and as had been the case when Bradd visited this place, the streets were deserted. In the square, Laralee hesitated and stared around her. The houses and shacks looked even dirtier in the morning sun.

"It seems almost as though the place were deserted," she said.

Greer shook his head.

"They are hiding. They left their furnaces burning. They must be afraid of us."

His words were wise, so she waited. Waited with the knowledge that only Greer and her pistol stood between them and death.

THEN a man came from one of the larger shacks. He stood facing the square, arms at his sides, his sooted face a mack of terror.

"We will tell you all we know," he cried. "We will direct the Gods to the Valley of Lords. The secret lies there. We have heard it from the lips of the agents."

Greer lifted his war club, balancing it easily in his hand.

"Let me go after him," he growled. "I'll make him speak sense."

Laralee was struggling for a secret meaning to the strange message.

"No," she said. "Wait."

To the man who waited, she called: "You have spoken to the man of light?" Her heart was beating wildly, hopefully. The man dropped to his knees in the dust.

"We have spoken to Veesa," he shouted. "We did not know that Veesa was sending his Goddess to us. We expected him to come himself—tonight."

Laralee stiffened. So she was a Goddess. Goddess of Veesa and of Light. She must play her part carefully and well.

"Come closer," she called, and even Greer was stunned by the new confi-

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dence in her voice. "You will not be harmed."

She saw others moving in about her and Greer. The man came within six yards of her and fell once more to his knees. His eyes were distended with fear.

"Veesa was kind and did not harm us," he said in a low voice. "We ask that the Goddess of Veesa leave us in peace. In return, we will offer what we know. It is little enough."

The square was ringed by poor slaves, all blackened by soot and thin with the lack of food.

"We will not harm you," Laralee said. "Veesa is busy with the western stars. He sent me in his place. Where is this Valley of the Lords? Where is the mystery of the fog and of the lost light?"

The man pointed east, beyond the rugged, treeless mountain. He shook his head sadly.

"We know little of the fog," he admitted. "The agents of the Lords come here. They steal our riches. They cause our illness and poverty. We hate the Lords. We hope you will destroy them."

He paused and looked around the square.

"We can only say that the agents sometimes talk to loudly of a strange machine they have hidden in the valley. A *fog* machine. It must be that which you seek. Last night Veesa followed the road toward the valley. We saw his light until it was lost in the hills."

There was much head-shaking and loud noises of approval came from the crowd.

Laralee's mind worked swiftly. Bradd was safe. He had gone along the road, seeking the Valley of Lords. Nevertheless, she had come this far, and Greer and she must follow Bradd. He might need them soon.

"We are puzzled," the man said suddenly, as though he had not dared speak of it before. "We ask one question. There are those of us who dared follow Veesa at a great distance. The children of this place saw Veesa riding in the carriage of an agent. Tell us why this is?"

A low growl of anger arose around them. Laralee wondered. Had Bradd accepted help from the agent?

The man's voice wasn't so humble now.

"Why did Veesa contaminate himself by riding with the agent of the Lords?"

She drew herself up proudly, playing a haughty part that she didn't feel inside her.

"Veesa moves in strange ways," she said quietly. "If he chose to ride in the carriage, he no doubt removed the occupant, this agent, swiftly and not gently. He has not explained this silly riddle to me. It tires me to talk like this. Open the way and we will leave. No harm will visit you.

"Perhaps Veesa will choose to shower some special reward upon you for your help."

They were satisfied, and parted before her as she walked. Greer shouldered his club, and Laralee, with as much grace as possible, left the square, walking at his side.

No one followed them, and in a short time they reached the dusty road. They followed it toward the range of mountains. Toward the Valley of the Lords, Laralee thought grimly, and toward Bradd, if they could only find him.

The Valley of Spara grew small behind them as they climbed the hot, red slopes of the foothills. Then Spara disappeared around a bend in the road and Laralee sank to the ground. Her legs refused to carry her farther. Her head throbbed with the heat of the

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sun.

"We will rest," she said.

Geer grinned.

"In the valley," he said, "you were a Goddess. Here with me you are only an exhausted child."

He scooped her up in his great arms and continued onward, carrying her as though she weighed no more than a feather.

At first she protested, but after a time her head fell against his shoulder and she listened to the steady, rhythmic beating of his heart. She closed her eyes to shield the sun from her tired brain, and slept.

BRADD awakened. His head ached dully. He had slept so long that most of the pain in his ankle and foot had gone. His brain functioned clearly. He remembered the boulder that had crushed his foot. He tried to reach the aching foot, but he was bound firmly with ropes and could not reach it. Sunlight flashed in his face, through the slatted sides of the box.

Gradually he became aware of the sounds around him. First, the crack of the whip as it urged the horses forward. The grinding, protesting progress of wheels. He struggled to make himself more comfortable in the dusty interior of the trunk-like box in which he was prisoner.

Then the wheels hit a smooth surface. The coachman shouted something that came to Bradd as a muffled cry. The coach surged ahead and made a sharp turn. He struggled up to a sitting position and could see the green valley into which they had come. This was strange country to him. The rugged red hills were still visible in a distance. During the night they had left the mountains in favor of this valley.

Tall spires of translucent marble came into view. Houses, half hidden among the evergreens along the road. He started to loosen his bonds with his fingers. His foot hurt worse. He wriggled his toes and was relieved to know that they weren't broken. He could walk.

The coach stopped abruptly. Bradd sank back, closing his eyes.

He heard footsteps descending from the coach and grinding against gravel. Then a gruff voice addressed him.

"Out with you, and no acting. You're awake all right."

He didn't move. A rough palm slapped his cheek hard. Groggily, angrily, he moved and opened his eyes.

"As I thought."

He stared into the eyes of the man who had attacked him last night. Bradd sat upright. They had stopped before a huge, ancient castle-like building of translucent pink marble. Tall spires of the stuff reached eagerly up to the sky. An empty moat surrounded the buildings.

He had an opportunity now to survey the agent who had brought him here. The man was dressed in elegant embroidered clothing, silk stockings and low boots. He wore a broad brimmed silk hat. The black, contorted face was pleased, indicating pleasure with a broken-toothed grin.

"So—Veesa has come to the home of Nara Fen," the agent snarled. "Nara Fen will be pleasantly surprised at receiving so great a visitor."

He drew a whistle from his pocket and blew a piercing blast upon it. The bridge over the moat dropped with a clang of metal against stone. A half-dozen blue-coated guards sprang across the bridge. They carried fire-lances as did the guards of Monoon.

The agent yanked Bradd from the box, still bound hand and foot, and threw him face down in the dirt. An intense fury was burning in Bradd's

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heart. A fury that told him to be careful what he did and said. He would bide his time. He got to his knees awkwardly, shaking the dirt from his face. He felt sick and dizzy.

"So Veesa is tamed, is he?" The agent whirled upon the waiting guards. "Take this prisoner to your master. He is from Monoon. That is enough for you to know."

The dark faced men closed in about Bradd. One of them brought him to his feet, slashed his bonds and twisted his right arm behind his back savagely. Bradd winced and remained silent. The agent mounted the carriage once more and went slowly across the bridge ahead of the guards.

Bradd the younger came in this manner to the house of Nara Fen, First Lord of the western slope of Mars.

NARA FEN sat on an ebony throne, his leering face lowered so that he might study the dusty, silent youth laying on the rushes at his feet. Bradd stayed where the guards had thrown him. His head was filled with a strange, buzzing sound. He could hardly see through the bloody haze that covered his eyes.

He brushed the hair back from his eyes and stared up at the Martian above him.

"A handsome dog," Nara Fen said. "It's unfortunate that his brain is lacking."

Sputann; the agent who had brought Bradd here, protested quietly.

"Not such a small brain, I think," he said. "The man played a good part. I was too clever for him."

Nara Fen lifted his eyes to meet the agent's.

"Silence, Sputann. Your own brain is of no *great* value. Anyone could have been as lucky."

Sputann frowned as Nara Fen studied his victim once more.

At last Nara Fen addressed Bradd personally.

"Well, you are here? You wanted to find the power of Mars? *I* am the power. What have you to say?"

Bradd was silent. The room was hushed, as though each of the half hundred men here were dead. It was an ugly silence.

"*Nothing* to say?" Nara Fen said slowly. "I take it that Monoon had finally decided to fight back? Decided to rise up and destroy the affliction?"

Bradd's heart was pounding loudly. He knew that he had no chance to protect himself here; weaponless, half dead with the punishment he had taken. Then Nara Fen *did* know something of the curse that had settled over Monoon?

"I know nothing of an affliction," Bradd said slowly. "I come from eastern Mars. I was attacked by this fool. I ask for release at once. It will be the wisest thing you can do."

Nara Fen's eyes narrowed. His mouth opened slowly. His face was very white.

"What is this you say?" He turned on Sputann. "What is this madness, Sputann?"

Sputann chuckled.

"Let me tell you what he said to the slaves of Spara. Then you will know the truth."

He repeated the words Bradd had said at Spara. How he, Sputann, had lurked in the shadows and listened.

When he was done, a murmur of angry voices arose in the hall. Nara Fen seemed more relaxed. His smile grew satanic.

"So—you lied to me? What is your name?"

Bradd's face became expressionless. He didn't answer.

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"What is your name? Who sent you here?"

Bradd thought of Laralee and Greer. Hoped they hadn't tried to follow him. Still, he refused to answer Nara Fen's questions. He saw that Nara Fen's rage was growing.

"Well! No matter. We know that you are from Monoon. As you are to die anyhow, it may make death harder for you to know that you have approached very close to the trouble you sought."

Bradd tried hard not to show the sudden wild hope that filled him. He waited, knowing that, by silence, he would learn the most.

"The fog that has ruined Monoon, comes from this valley," Nara Fen announced dramatically. It was evident that he was enjoying himself to the utmost. He leaned forward, eyes narrowed and glittering.

"Do you understand?" he shouted. "Monoon is doomed, and when she is a dead satellite, the fog will lift. I and my henchmen will own a wilderness of riches. Is that clear enough to sink into your peasant skull?"

Nara Fen was burning with a desire to torture this rugged, silent youth who dared stay here without expression on his features, without a word issuing from his lips.

"Talk," he shouted, and stood up abruptly. "Talk, damn you, or I'll cut out your tongue so that you *can't* talk. Pray for help. Pray for your people, that they might be delivered from my power."

Bradd's lips were sealed. He had never seen such savage hatred written on the face of a man. Suddenly Nara Fen sank back to his throne. The color washed from his face. There was defeat written there. All emotion was drawn from him.

"Take him away," he said in a listless voice. "Hide him in the lower cells where there is no light. Tomorrow, perhaps he will be more willing to speak to me."

Bradd felt his arms jerked back again, and gritted his teeth tightly together against the pain. As he passed Sputann, the agent kicked him brutally in the side. He doubled up silently in pain, and the room went black. He heard Sputann chuckling, and knew no more.

GREER grew tired of his burden. It was long after dark, and Greer had carried Laralee for many miles. At last he had reached the crest of the hills, and was looking down at the dark, lush valley of the Lords.

He found a large bush growing on the naked hillside. He put Laralee down on the soft, cool dirt a short distance from the road. The bush would hide them well. Greer had grown to hate the queer light that followed them. It wasn't so bright now, but it would give them away if they persisted on entering the valley before dawn.

He crouched before the sleeping girl, his club across his knees, his eyes and ears alert for any sound. His head fell forward and he dozed. When he awakened, the moons were bright and the valley below him was twinkling with rainbow color from the multicolored spires.

A short distance ahead, the road wound down hill past a huge castle that dominated the others. Greer could see a winding, silvery river near the far side of the valley. He saw something, also, that puzzled him. Near the center of the valley the floor of the earth raised into a perfect cone-shaped hill. There was a hole in the center of the cone, and from it shot a hazy, pale white smoke that disappeared into the sky. Yet it could

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not be smoke, he thought, for it faded into nothingness almost instantly.

There were fires about the base of the cone, and men who went swiftly from place to place, like tiny ants. He thought he could see coaches and strato-cars also, but the light wasn't good enough to account for many details.

His thoughts turned to Bradd, who was somewhere down there, ahead of them. Thinking of Bradd made him turn once more to Laralee. He studied her lovingly, knowing that this precious burden was his to guard with his life. Laralee slept well, her head cushioned on her hands, her slim figure doubled up to ward off the hard ground beneath her.

For a long time Greer sat there, listening to her steady breathing, and wishing that she were safely on Monoon, so that he might work alone.

It must be close to day, he thought. He smelled the fresh breeze that came up suddenly from the hills. They must not be caught here on the barren hillside when day came.

Greer arose, stretched his cramped muscles and gathered the girl once more into his arms. She awakened abruptly, crying out, pushing him away from her. Fully awake, she sighed.

"Put me down, Greer," she said. "I will walk now."

He placed her on her feet. Laralee looked down into the valley.

"I have slept a long time." Her voice was filled with surprise.

"We have come a long way," Greer admitted. "Below us, Bradd will be waiting."

The girl stared down at the castle below the hill.

"Then we must go at once," she said. "We must find him."

Greer caught her arm, holding her back.

"Wait," he urged. "We must make a plan. We must not be captured. There is no one else to help us, or to help Bradd."

He spoke the thoughts that had been troubling him during his wakeful hours.

"We must find out where Bradd has gone. Perhaps, if we hide in the heavy shrubbery near that castle, we can listen to those who pass, and pick up some knowledge that will lead us to him. A stranger's appearence here would start too many tongues wagging." Laralee nodded soberly.

"And when night comes again, we will find Bradd?"

Greer thought of the cursed light, fading perhaps, but still strong enough to betray them.

"Perhaps," he said. "We will see."

BRADD knew it must be morning, for he had been in the lightless cell for many hours and had heard footsteps and voices, far above him. They had pushed food under the door for him. Mush that tasted like the Martian *mulka* weed ground into dust and soaked in water. He had slept and grown strong. He felt better and was able to walk again.

Now he heard loud voices outside the cell. A key turned in the lock and the door opened wide. A huge, black-bearded keeper stared in at him.

"Come out."

He stumbled out into the twilight of the hall, blinded by the light. He followed the bearded jailer up three flights of damp stone steps, and out into the courtyard. Horses were being led about. Nara Fen and Sputann were already mounted on white steeds. Nara Fen turned toward Bradd. He laughed shortly.

"Our guest of the night is a sorry looking picture," he shouted. "Come, Veesa. We go for a ride."

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Nara Fen's thin, extremely tall figure was clad in shining *meta-armor*. He carried a long firegun which he handled like a spear. Bradd noticed that it was pointed in his direction. He shuffled forward, clothing dirty and torn, boots ripped open at the seams.

"We are going to the Cone," Nara Fen said. "Our visit will fill a twofold purpose. You will see the thing which you seek, and you will die feeling its sting of death."

Guards mounted their horses. Sputann called loudly to one of them.

"Bring the visitor a proper mount." He pointed in the direction of the deep moat. A guard ran across the courtyard, dropped out of sight into the moat and came up after a few minutes, dragging an immense *sheed* behind him. The men in the yard laughed loudly at the joke. The *sheed* was a long-bodied, cumbersome animal, covered with black, greasy wool. It stood there, head swaying from side to side, bewildered eyes staring at Bradd. Nara Fen levelled his fire-gun at Bradd.

"Mount the beast," he snarled.

Bradd knew what would happen if he refused. The fire-gun would blast him to nothingness before he took two steps. He sat astride the *sheed,* his feet dragging in the dust. He was forced to ride ahead, while Nara Fen and his agent rode directly behind. The guards came in the rear.

The horrible stench of the *sheed's* wool was in Bradd's nostrils. His clothing and hands were covered by the oil that oozed from the animal's coat. Far ahead of him, he saw the Cone, rising from the flat floor of the valley.

At last it was close to them, and Bradd forgot his own plight and stared wonderingly at the green slopes of the huge mound.

It seemed that all the Lords of the valley were here. Their horses were tethered around the base of the mound. From inside came the steady pulsating roar of many motors. The Cone seemed almost a holy spot to these people. A wide road had been built around the base. Huge doors led into it from all directions. Great cases of materials were being unloaded from Startovans, and hurried into the Cone.

The *sheed* stopped its plodding walk, and Nara Fen drew alongside.

"Dismount from your noble beast," he said. "You will not need him again."

A new courage was growing inside Bradd the Younger. A courage born of desperation. He was very close to the solution of Monoon's troubles. This was what he had waited for. He had suffered worse than death from the hands of Nara Fen, for Bradd was proud, and pride died hard within him.

Nara Fen entered one of the huge crystal doors.

His men followed. Bradd, alert and ready now, was lost among them. His arms were pinned tightly behind him, so that he could not escape. Inside, there was a large domed room. The place was filled with intricate machinery. Dozens of men worked about the big motor that ran the machines. A workman, clad in brown shorts and a metallic blouse, saluted Nara Fen.

"Chamber ten reporting, Sir," he said. His face was youthful and eager. "All cartridges full and ready to take over. The power comes from chamber eight now, Sir."

Nara Fen nodded and spoke curtly.

The workman went away, satisfied.

Nara Fen turned.

"You see one of the most wonderful machines ever produced," he said. "No harm in telling you about it. You will be destroyed before you leave here. What you learn will be sealed in the heart of the machine."

Bradd had been thinking much about

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the personality of this man. When he was calm, he was dangerous. When he lost his temper, it made him weak and frustrated—unable even to speak intelligently. That had been proven to Bradd only last night.

"You are very sure of your cleverness," Bradd said. He was trying hard to appear calm and untroubled.

Nara Fen gasped.

"So—at last the prisoner has decided to talk."

Bradd waited.

"Good," Nara Fen went on. "Listen to me carefully. You wonder about the fog that covers Monoon? You came here seeking the answer."

He chuckled.

"In one sense you are wise. In another, very unwise. You were wise to guess the source of the fog. You were unwise to seek me out. I am not selfish. I will share my secret with you.

"Many months ago, I conceived this idea of a cone as a source of terrific power, sending out a ray of fog that would envelope a huge stretch of land."

Nara Fen knew he was speaking to an audience now. His voice rose to a higher pitch.

"FOG is a terrible enemy to those who are not prepared to fight it. It closes all avenues of escape. It kills men's hopes and drives them mad. You can't escape it. Hence, my choice of fog as a weapon. The solution of how it must be produced was simple for a man of my intellect."

He frowned at Sputann, and continued.

"The Cone is made up of forty chambers, such as the one we are now in. These chambers surround a shaft from which the fog escapes. Each power chamber . . ."

A voice over a speaker system drowned out Nara Fen's explanation.

"CHAMBER EIGHT CLOSED. OPEN CHAMBER NINE."

Far away, powerful motors faded, then hummed louder again with fresh vigor.

"You have heard a demonstration of how carefully our power system is handled," Nara Fen said proudly. "But, on with my story of a brilliant plan.

"We completed this project. The fog beam, when first used, was so powerful that it did not become visible for several thousand miles. Carefully, we aimed the shaft at Monoon. The motors were turned on and we now wait for Monoon to kick in its last death struggle."

The speaker interrupted again.

"CHAMBER NINE CLOSED. OPEN CHAMBER TEN."

Near Bradd the motors roared into action. The room was filled with noise, shattering all hope of Nara Fen being heard unless he shouted.

"Monoon is only the first. We will claim the deserted satellite as our own. After that—Venus, perhaps Earth, will become our targets."

He grinned evilly. He gestured to Sputann.

"The prisoner does not seem impressed," he cried. "I wonder if he would feel better to die in the same manner as did his leader, the *mighty* Prince Strawn."

He lead the way into the small hall, and closed the soundproof door behind them. He, Sputann and Nara Fen stood alone. Bradd wanted to ask questions now. He wondered about Strawn's voice. How had it come to them from the void?

Nara Fen led the way to a small door. He opened it and went in. Sputann was behind Bradd, pistol drawn. The cell was small, housing only a small viso-screen sender. Transmittal wires led upward into the stone ceiling. Nara

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Fen pressed the button release on the sender and the room was filled with a familiar voice.

"Why doesn't Prince Strawn speak? Why doesn't . . ."

Nara Fen flipped the button off again.

"Because," he said in a low voice, "Strawn is dead."

"Recorded," Sputann said, nodding at the machine. "Your Prince was a wise man. He came to plead with us in behalf of his people. Of course, we could not allow him to return. A few sharp shavings pressed beneath his nails, and he was ready to speak to his people. He could not stand pain. He was an old man."

Sputann shrugged.

The words sent chill horror down Bradd's spine. He whirled, ignoring the gun, grasping Sputann's thick neck.

"You—dirty . . ."

"CRACK."

Nara Fen's fire-gun hit him a hard blow, hurtling him back against the wall. Bradd was white with anger. He came up slowly, his back to the wall, lips drawn to a snarl across his teeth.

"Easy," Nara Fen said. "The gun deals death swiftly."

"You'll—pay . . ."

"I'll pay—nothing," Nara Fen said.

Sputann was rubbing his neck. His face was red, partly from anger—partly fear.

He came after Bradd slowly, head weaving back and forth like a snake.

"Stay away," Bradd said. He hardly recognized his own voice.

Sputann couldn't hear him. He was raving mad, crazy for revenge.

"Entertaining," Nara Fen said. To Bradd, he was speaking from an immense distance. *"I have often wondered how far Sputann would go."*

It was a dreamy voice—far away. Bradd stood very still, watching the big man come in. Sputann's arms were swinging, gorilla fashion, at his sides. Suddenly he charged. Bradd stiffened, forgetting everything but that ugly, leering face.

His left arm went out and caught Sputann, holding him at arm's length. His right fist shot upward, catching the agent on the bony part of the jaw. There was a dry, shary *"crack."*

Still far away, in another existence, Nara Fen laughed. It was a sly, satisfied laugh.

"Two birds with one stone," he was saying. "I have often pondered doing that myself."

BRADD'S eyes saw only the fat, red faced man on the floor before him. Only the red was draining from Sputann's face now. It had gone white, and Sputann's head was twisted far around to the right, in a broken, unnatural position.

Bradd looked at Nara Fen. The fire-gun still covered him. Nara Fen moved forward until the head of the spear-like gun was pressed into Bradd's stomach.

"Now," he said, *"march."*

Greer grasped Laralee's arm and pointed.

"There, beyond the wall," he said. "It is Bradd."

Together, shepherd and daughter of royalty, they crouched under the heavy green protection of the hedge. They had been waiting for many hours. Each dreaded the moment when they might be discovered. Each prayed for some clue—some hope. The sun was bright. They would not be detected, at least until night.

They watched the procession as it left the castle. Laralee was frightened, but Greer, wild with anger, wanted to charge to Bradd's assistance. With clenched fists, they watched Bradd disappear down the road ahead of the procession of horsemen.

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"He hates them for what they are doing," Greer said. "Yet he will get revenge. We must follow at once—before dark."

Laralee nodded.

"The light is not visible if the sun remains bright. We may pass for natives if we are bold."

He took her arm.

"Wait until these two pass who are now on the road."

The two peasants went by them, and on up the road.

"Now," Greer said.

They slipped from the hedge and went in the direction Bradd had taken. They followed the road, looking neither right nor left, until they came out into the open circle about the Cone.

All life of the valley seemed to revolve around this place. Great Stratovans were unloading boxes that were moved into the Cone. The Cone itself looked like some human manufactured volcano.

Greer dared not hesitate here. He saw the horses of Nara Fen and the *sheed* on which Bradd had ridden. They were tied in the shadow of the Cone. He knew that Bradd was inside, and strode unhesitatingly toward the place.

"Wait," Laralee whispered. "I have my pistol. If we go together, we may be captured together. If we separate, we will have a double chance to help him, and ourselves. Go ahead. I will follow."

Greer dared not wait too long. Already, eyes were upon them, searching for anything suspicious.

He let go of her fingers and marched toward a door. A well armed guard stopped him at the door.

"You are not allowed inside, rough fellow. Only Lords and workmen come here."

Greer stared at the man with narrowed eyes. All these hours, he had held his temper in check. He had longed for battle many times, and for Bradd's sake, held back. From the corner of his eye, he watched Laralee smile at a guard and enter the Cone without a challenge.

Greer grinned suddenly. It was a wide, innocent grin.

"You aren't going to hold me here?"

The guard drew his pistol.

"That was my plan."

Greer's smile vanished.

"Then—change it."

His war club came down neatly beside the guard's left ear. There was that instant when only the crack of wood against bone disturbed perfect silence. Greer, seemingly unconcerned, entered the Cone.

THEN a mighty cry of warning went around the Cone. Guards ripped their weapons from their holsters and charged into the Cone. Greer moved swiftly for his great bulk, coolly seeking only one man.

He looked hurriedly around the room he had entered. Men were staring at him, so amazed at his presence that they could not move at once. It was like facing a pack of wolves. Each would fight in a pack, but each hesitated facing him alone.

Then they closed in on Greer slowly. It would have been a simple matter to shoot him down. Perhaps no one thought to do so. Perhaps the fact that he had no pistol made this seem unnecessary. Greer waited, while the guards outside the Cone gathered near the door. Then, lifting his club, he started calmly to break his way through the workmen who faced him.

He seemed as unconcerned as ever. As he had faced the timber-wolves of the lowlands, now he faced human wolves. He knocked three of them down with broken ribs and skulls before

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he felt the sting of an open wound on his cheek. He wiped the blood away and the sight of it on his own hand, maddened him further. There was an open door leading deeper into the Cone. He headed for it.

Hot flame flickered out and touched his back. He whirled and saw a guard, fire-gun in action, seeking the range. He picked up a workman, held him above his head and with a grunt, heaved the man straight at the guard. The man screamed as the fire ate at him, and the guard went down flat.

Greer ran down the corridor. He lifted his hand as he ran, placed his fingers between his lips and sent a piercing whistle ahead of him. He paused, hearing the men close behind him, waiting for the whistle to return.

It came, faint but straight ahead. The call of the lowland stag. No one but he and Bradd knew that signal. With a triumphant grin, he charged ahead.

He came to a turn in the corridor. He whistled again, and the call came back, closer this time. Greer wondered about Laralee. What had happened to the girl? He had paid no attention to her. Unless she betrayed herself by fighting, no one would notice her in the rush.

The men were close behind Greer now. He stood close to the wall where the hallway turned, and waited. A guard hurried past him. Greer swung neatly, catching the guard in the back. The blow broke his spine. Grasping the guard's fallen fire-gun, Greer turned and sent a long, searing blast of flame into the ranks of men who came close behind. The hallway smelled of burned flesh and echoed to the cries of dying guards. He tossed the gun away and went onward.

He came out suddenly on a small lodge above a deep pit. Almost unable to stop in time, he fell flat, clutching at the smooth floor. He heard Bradd call to him.

He had emerged on the central shaft, and looking across the deep pit, he saw Bradd locked in a struggle with a tall, barbarically dressed stranger. It was the man who had ridden behind Bradd on the trip from the castle, and as Greer watched, Bradd caught Nara Fen neatly in the back and sent him plunging into the steaming cauldron below. Bradd's voice came to Greer, merged with Nara Fen's dying scream.

"Go back. You're at a dead end. I'll meet you outside. Hurry before it's too late."

Greer turned, a grin of satisfaction on his face. So Bradd had not done so badly after all. Leave it to Bradd, Greer thought. He'll make out.

Then he heard Bradd's sudden cry, and pivoted, staring with wide eyes at what he saw. Bradd had been too close to the edge of the pit. The stones had given away. Even now they crumbled beneath Bradd's feet, and Greer watched with wonder and horror as the young shepherd slipped and fell backward after Nara Fen.

Greer hesitated, then heard Laralee call his name somewhere far back along the corridor. He turned and started back, swiftly.

LARALEE heard the cry of warning. She slipped quietly into the big room full of machinery that roared until she could hear hardly anything else. Two or three men remained at the machine. She saw one woman, dressed much as she, talking with the men. There was a sign over the machine.

ROOM TEN

Then there were more of these rooms, she thought, built around the base of the Cone. Men were hurrying swiftly

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toward the room she had seen Greer enter. She pretended to ignore them. She knew how little chance to escape Greer had, and finding Bradd might turn out to be her own job.

Gradually the noise seemed less and she heard the men talking. Their voices, and the voice of the woman, merged excitedly. Evidently an intruder here was unwelcome indeed.

"The shaft is too precious," the woman was saying. "If it were destroyed . . .?"

A workman ran past her.

"Leave one man on duty. We are next. Watch for the power change."

Then the voice came over the speaker.

"POWER OFF IN ROOM NINE. ON IN ROOM TEN."

The sudden increase of noise stunned her. The room vibrated as the motors leaped into triple action.

The woman, evidently the wife of the one workman who remained, said in a frightened voice:

"They must find the spy before he does damage. It would take little now to destroy us."

Laralee moved closer to the machine. The workman smiled at her, but his wife scowled. The shaft, Laralee guessed, was operated by a series of machines. Room ten, the one she was in, was now causing activity of some kind in the shaft.

"It would take little to destroy . . ."

Bradd had been seeking the cause of the fog. Somehow it all tied up. If Bradd was here? She must depend on her sex to protect her. Laralee hated that, but she admitted to herself that she was not strong.

She moved closer to the motors.

The workman, a middle-aged, scant-haired man, spoke to her.

"Why is it you do not go with the others?"

Laralee gave him a wide-eyed smile.

"I—I hate bloodshed," she said.

The workman nodded.

"I like to see a woman who does not have to quarrel and fight to make her happy."

His smile was almost too friendly. His wife sniffed. She was broad and fat, and stray wisps of uncombed hair hung down around her pimply face.

"Why don't you say that you love the sight of a pretty wench, Hurbert?"

Laralee was near the main motor now. She knew something of its structure. Those in the Monoon power houses were much the same. Man and woman were arguing heatedly now.

"Rave like an old witch," the man shouted. "Why are wives all like you? You grow fat and homely and curse us when we relieve our eyes by staring at youth."

Laralee drew her pistol and fired it straight at the main power tubes that fed the machine. The room was filled with a blinding flash of colored light. She heard the woman scream wildly and saw her start toward her. The woman knocked her down with her immense body and fell on top of her, tearing at her face with clawed fingers.

Fat fingers touched her eyelids. Nails started to cut. She rolled over, aimed her pistol upward and pressed it into the woman's fat ribs. She pulled the trigger. There was a long sigh as life left the woman's body. Laralee fainted.

BRADD rolled over on his back and rubbed a hand painfully across his eyes. He felt more dead than alive. The light that clung to his body showed faintly the outline of the metallic bottom of the shaft. The shaft was *dry*. He remembered Nara Fen telling him that the fog was produced by steam under immense pressure. How the

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steam would kill him immediately.

That was before he had overcome Nara Fen and managed to push him. Bradd shuddered, looking around him. Yes—that wet, sodden blanket of clothing, huddled against the far side of the tube, would be Nara Fen.

Then why hadn't he, Bradd, suffered a like fate?

Someone had turned off the power that supplied the shaft. He was sure of it, for the entire Cone was stilled now. He heard no sound, not even a vibration.

He sat up painfully. Whoever turned off the power, had done it at the instant he fell. Had saved his life.

He sat up painfully and looked upward, toward the tunnel openings on the wall above. His eyes sought and found a small metal ladder, leading into the shaft, probably for repair work. He stumbled across the bottom of the shaft and started to climb. One arm hung limp at his side, but he made the best of it.

Bradd went through the hallway slowly, and reached the wrecked, smoking Room Ten. The workman's lifeless body had been lifted and tossed across a huge broken tube. Then he saw Laralee. He pushed the body of the fat woman off Laralee, lifted her with one arm and placed her across his shoulder. His bad hand could still grasp a pistol. He took Laralee's. He could feel life coursing through Laralee's slim body, and did not worry about her for the present.

He went from one room to the next, and was increasingly amazed for each of them was deserted. He blasted each motor as he went, breaking every tube. He worked grimly, methodically, for he was still in much pain.

Where had the people gone? Where was Greer?

At last, crumpled on a corner beneath a half dozen dead guards, he found Greer. The shepherd was in a sitting position, only his red head visible above the pile of bodies. His chin was bleeding and his eyes, wide open, were staring straight ahead.

Greer was stunned.

Bradd placed Laralee carefully on the floor and managed to free the giant from the mess on the floor. He helped Greer to his feet. The giant blinked at him and grinned foolishly.

"We must get out of here," Bradd said. In spite of the completely deserted condition of the Cone, he talked in a whisper.

Greer grinned crookedly.

"The club killed," he said. "It wasn't fast enough. There were too many."

There must have been, Bradd thought. Half a dozen men lay on the floor, their skulls cracked open. Greer's head was bleeding. One arm hung limp at his side. His clothing was half torn from his body.

"They left me for dead," Greer said wonderingly. "They ran as though they were afraid of the devil."

Suddenly the meaning of it all flashed through Bradd's mind. Here were dozens of machines powered to send untold activity into the void. The fuel for those machines? He remembered the tons of material being unloaded from Strato-vans. *Radioactive lead.* Tons of material that must be used before it could overheat and blow up of its own accord, instead of exploding under controlled processes.

THE machines were destroyed. They couldn't use the energy. Yet it was all here, packed in the Cone, and probably fast reaching the exploding point.

"Greer," he said. "Greer, for the sake of your life, get out of here. We may have only seconds to go."

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Greer struggled up, leaned on the wall and staggered toward the door. Bradd picked up the girl. He tried to steady Greer by leaning his weight against the big man. They moved hesitantly forward toward the door of the Cone.

They reached the sunlight, but Bradd knew the danger was still close and deadly.

One lonely horse and two Strato-vans were parked in the empty square. He moved toward the van closest them, pushing Greer ahead of him. As though in a nightmare, he placed Laralee on the seat and helped Greer into the empty rear of the van. Behind the controls, he released the rocket lever and the truck began to rumble out of the square.

The truck climbed the steep hills slowly, for it was built only for heavy loads and low speeds. Gradually the valley grew small and Bradd's mind became more at rest. At the lip of the valley, he stopped and turned to stare behind him.

The Cone had turned brown. The heat, generating below its surface, sent smoke curling lazily upward from the shaft.

He drove onward again, stopping only when they were safely in the hills. Laralee awakened and was staring at him silently, evidently trying to explain her presence here.

"Look back," he said in a hushed voice. "See what happens when a machine of doom meets its end."

He had hardly spoken when an intense explosion rocked the valley and made the road under them shudder with protest. The entire top of the Cone disappeared into the sky. A mushroom of flame leaped upward and disappeared into a cloud of black smoke.

The valley was no longer green. It was brown and withered. The buildings were gone. The trees were no longer shafted against the sky. The valley was a dark pit of death, with a smouldering cavity lying in its center.

"Fog machine of Nara Fen," Bradd said slowly. "No wonder the machine demanded careful control. One room out of order, and nothing could save the Cone from destruction. If one man must control so much energy, he should use it in a good cause."

He looked down at the girl at his side. His eyes were no longer bitter. He spoke softly.

"It was you who destroyed the first machine?"

She nodded, holding his hand tightly. She shuddered.

"You saved my life," he said.

"And you saved mine," she answered.

Greer moaned in his sleep. They stared back at him, lying in the dimness of the truck bed.

"Greer doesn't realize that he has helped save Monoon from the fog. Greer is sorry, because six men managed to overcome him and his war club. He is ashamed of himself."

Laralee smiled.

"Greer doesn't know, I'm sure, that he is the bodyguard and best friend of the future Prince of Monoon."

Bradd did not answer. He started the rocket motors and eased the truck forward, toward the Valley of Spara and the Gray-ghost hid in the canyon beyond. At last he said:

"You dream fine dreams, Laralee. But should your dreams come true, remember that I could ask for no finer Queen than you. I could not be Prince without you at my side."

He didn't take his eyes from the darkening road after that. He felt her soft lips shyly pressed against his cheek—and smiled.

THE END

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The WANDERING SWORDSMEN

by William P. McGivern

D'Artagnan parried the sword thrust with his gun, and then lashed out with it . . .

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THE clerk at the Personnel desk was obviously harassed and tired.

"All I can do is take your name and address, buddy," he said. "We're going out on strike any day now anyway."

Phillip Poincare nodded understandingly but he couldn't keep a discouraged frown from flitting across his face.

"This is about the tenth place I've been to this morning," he said. "I thought your concern wouldn't be affected by the labor conditions, but—"

"It's like this," the clerk said patiently. "We make office equipment, but our union is affiliated with the steel unions, so we go the same way they do." He glanced down at Phillip's application. "Have you been over to the union office yet?"

"I'm an office worker," Phillip said. "At least I was before—"

"Before the war you mean," the clerk said. He looked down at Phillip's application again. "There's nothing in here about your service record. What outfit were you in?"

Phillip smiled tiredly. He'd been

The Musketeers were back from the war and looking for jobs—but the only real trade they knew was fighting, so—

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asked the same question everywhere he went and he still hadn't figured out an answer that sounded reasonable.

He wondered what the young clerk would say if he told him the simple truth; that he'd spent the war in Paris as a member of the French underground. That of course wasn't too remarkable. But supposing he then added that his comrades during those three incredible years had been four men known to the rest of the world only as characters in a novel called the Three Musketeers and written by a man dead for over a hundred years?

The clerk would probably call the plant guards and have him escorted from the place as a potentially violent lunatic.

So he simply shook his head.

"I wasn't in the army. "I—I was abroad."

"So was I," the clerk said. "Took a long joy ride with the Third Army. Just got out a few months ago. Well I've got your name and when things get straightened out we may give you a ring."

"Thank you," Phillip said.

Outside it was raining. He walked along slowly through the grayness of the chilly afternoon, a neat little man with pleasant undistinguished features, whom no one would bother to glance at twice. His room was only a few blocks away and he decided to walk, partly for exercise and partly to conserve his dwindling savings.

Perhaps it was the somberness of the afternoon but soon his thoughts were drifting nostalgically over the past few years of his life—the years which had been so excitingly enlivened by the Musketeers and D'Artagnan.

Their existence in Paris had been precarious, but Phillip found himself forgetting the hunger and uncertainty and fear and remembering instead memorable nights when they'd been fortunate to find a warm room and a bottle of wine. Aramis—Aramis, the gracious, fastidious one—had never been able to drink the Parisian cognac or worse still the horrible concoction called calvados, which was made from cider in the south of France, but Porthos, whose huge frame contained a stomach like a concrete mixer, always found it delightful.

And Phillip remembered the electric, charged air which D'Artagnan brought into a room, his keen face as bright as a flashing sword when he was planning one of his reckless campaigns against the Germans.

Phillip pulled his coat collar tighter against the wind. Those had been days and nights which would live with him as long as he drew breath.

WHEN the Americans had entered Paris their paths had separated. American Intelligence needed Phillip then, but the Musketeers had scornfully refused to accept anything so peaceful as simply informing on the Nazis who had disappeared into the slums and alleys of Montmarte and Pigalle.

They considered their score far too personal to be satisfyingly settled in that manner. One night, after a last solemn drink, they said goodbye to Phillip, and he had seen them no more.

Occasionally reports had come to his attention, stories of former Nazis who had come to sudden and violent ends somewhere in the labyrinth of Paris, and while there were usually no witnesses who cared to talk about such things, he felt sure that the Musketeers were striking their silent blows in the only way they would consider satisfying and honorable.

He came out of his reverie as he approached the house in which he lived. The past was full of ghosts and mem-

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ories that were better forgotten. He squared his shoulders and tried to throw off the weight of his depression. It was over and done with and his job now was to try and fit himself back into this post-war world, which was in many ways a more difficult thing than fighting the Nazis in Paris . . .

He opened the door and tiptoed up the shabbily-carpeted steps, hoping he wouldn't meet his landlady. He didn't owe her any money as yet but he wasn't in a mood to tell her of his failure to find a job, and to listen to her inevitable sympathetic encouragement.

With his mind still miles and years away from the present he opened the door of his room and snapped on the light. The usually cheerless furnishings met his eye, and it wasn't until he had hung up his coat and hat that he noticed the presence of a strange bottle on one of the tables.

The bottle was placed directly in the center of the table and he saw it was full and that the seal was unbroken. Wonderingly he picked it up and looked at the label.

For a moment he couldn't believe his eyes. What was a bottle of French cognac doing in his room? It didn't belong to him he was sure.

The last time he had seen this brand of cognac had been the night he had said goodbye for the last time to the Three Musketeers and D'Artagnan. Porthos had brought the bottle and Aramis had considered his palate everlastingly insulted by its vileness.

Phillip smiled at the bottle in his hands, forgetting in his sudden rush of memory, the mystery of its presence here in his room.

Then he heard a low smothered sound from behind the closed bathroom door!

Phillip's heart began pounding. He looked at the bottle again and then at the bathroom door, while the smile on his face spread in an unbelieving grin.

He set the bottle down slowly on the table while his reason kept insisting that his hopes were foolish and his deductions insane. It simply couldn't be!

Hardly conscious of moving he started for the door, but as his hand reached for the knob, it swung open suddenly and a huge figure towered over him, grinning broadly.

"Phillip! *mon ami,*" a booming voice cried, and hands the size of two ordinary man's were on his shoulders shaking him affectionately.

Phillip tried to speak. His mouth opened, his lips moved, but there were no words.

"Out of the way, you overgrown cow," another familiar voice shouted behind Porthos, and a well-built, handsome young man squeezed through the doorway and grasped Phillip's hand.

"Athos!" Phillip said. He looked from Athos' genial smiling face to Porthos, too speechless to say the words that were tumbling in his breast.

"I know it's a surprise," Athos said, "but you should be accustomed to surprises after the life you led in Paris."

Another voice said, "When all this confusion is over will you kindly let me out of this vile place."

PORTHOS moved aside and Phillip saw the plump figue of Aramis behind him. Aramis' face wore its usual expression of martyred toleration, which was habitual with him unless the appointments of wherever he happened to be were of the most exquisite type. He relaxed enough when he saw Phillip to grin warmly and extended a slim, graceful hand.

"This is excellent," he said. "We are all so happy to see you that it is hard to speak. But why are you living

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in this place? After the past hard years you deserve something luxurious, something graceful and pleasant."

"Aramis," Athos said pleasantly, "still has his usual exquisite taste and execrable manners."

Porthos had picked up the bottle of cognac and was industriously removing the cork.

"Enough of this talk," he said. "Phillip, get glasses. For old time's sake we must drink."

Phillip got glasses and watched in a happy silence while Porthos poured a stiff drink. They raised their glasses and looked inquiringly at Phillip.

"To what shall we drink?" Athos asked.

Phillip was regaining his composure gradually and now he noticed that one was absent.

"Where, my friends, is D'Artagnan?" he asked.

"He is here," Athos said. "We're expecting him shortly; don't worry. But our toast."

"To happy days," Phillip said. "Will that do?"

"Excellent," Athos said.

They drank the cognac in one breath and Porthos lumbered about immediately to fill the glasses.

Aramis placed one hand over his glass and shook his head.

"I refuse to drink more than one glass of that vile slop. Sentiment alone prompted me to even drink that much." He sighed and sat down wearily. "Happy days. That was the perfect toast, Phillip. That is what we are yearning for. I want to dine and drink and live in a lovely, pleasant apartment and do nothing at all for years and years."

"Food is the thing," Porthos said enthusiastically. "I dream, *mon ami,* of huge steaks, of mounds of butter, of all I can eat—of everything I want."

"We must work, naturally," Athos said, "for we must have money. But we want jobs which do not tax us too heavily. For," he smiled, "there would be no point in working all day and being too tired at night to enjoy ourselves."

Phillip sat down slowly and regarded them as a parent might look at naive, innocent children. They were smiling so confidently that he hated to tell them the bitter truth. So he stalled.

"How did you get here?" he asked.

"On a disgusting boat," Aramis said. "Because of our unique status as Nationals of the seventeenth century Paris we were forced to stow away on a ship which wasn't fit to carry pigs. Porthos did not mind," he added caustically.

Porthos grinned hugely.

"*Mais certainment,* I did not mind. Were we not coming to America, our adopted country? The land of sunshine and plenty? Where everyone is fed so well? Of course I did not mind."

"You have no money?" Phillip asked, although he knew it was an unnecessary question.

"Not a sou," Athos said grandly.

"That is why we came here directly," Aramis said.

Phillip shook his head sorrowfully. He saw that their clothes were not good, that their shoes were broken and dusty, that they all looked tired and hungry.

"It is difficult to explain," he said.

"What is difficult?" Porthos asked. "Now all is fine. The war is over. The days of privation and suffering are behind us. Now we must begin to enjoy ourselves."

"Things are not perfect here," Phillip said. "There is a very serious housing shortage for one thing. Also many things are still rationed. In addition there are more and more strikes in the country."

Unconsciously he dropped his eyes as he spoke, for he felt he couldn't look

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at them while he blasted their dreams. Now he looked up, hoping they would understand, would adjust themselves to the fact that all was not milk and honey in this land they had adopted.

The Musketeers were smiling genially at him.

"But what is difficult?" Porthos asked.

"You don't understand," Phillip insisted. "You can't get a place to live."

Aramis smiled indulgently.

"We know it will take time," he said. "We will be patient. Even a week is not too long."

"A week," Phillip said weakly.

"YES, even a week," Aramis went on. "And we do not insist on luxury. Enough room to move around in, that's all."

"And," Phillip asked, "just what would you consider adequate?"

He tried not to be sarcastic, for he realized that he was talking, in a very literal sense, to absolute children.

Aramis waved one plump hand carelessly.

"Ten rooms," he said, with the air of a man who has suddenly decided to be magnanimous and is cutting his request in half.

"You can't get ten rooms," Phillip said. "You can't even get one room unless you're willing to wait your turn for about six weeks. You'll have to live right here and maybe my landlady won't even allow you to do that."

"So we will live here," Porthos said amiably. "We will cook huge meals and drink barrels of wine and cognac. We must make the best of things." This last he threw in as a concession to Phillip, just to indicate that he understood.

"I will not live here," Aramis announced flatly. "I am sick to the death of small hovels. I want space, I want comfort."

"You'll have to live in the park then," Phillip said.

"This will be satisfactory," Athos said. "Porthos thinks only of his stomach, Aramis only of his comfort. I want good things also but I also intend to work."

"That will also be difficult," Phillip said. "What can you do?"

"I was the second best swordsman in France," Athos said. "I can ride, hunt, shoot," he shrugged eloquently, "surely I will have no trouble."

"You aren't a union member for one thing," Phillip said, "and, secondly, there are so many strikes right now that it isn't easy to get a job. Thirdly, service men get preference in jobs and you weren't a service man. I know this all sounds confusing to you, but believe me, I'm only trying to explain that everything isn't as simple as you think."

"First," Athos said, "what is this union thing?"

"It's like a club, an organization which helps its members get more money, better working conditions, things like that. If you aren't a member you can't work."

Athos smiled. "I will have no difficulty. I will join a union. I was a member of the Order of Louis, and that I am sure was harder to join than any of these unions."

"What Athos says in quite true," Porthos said, nodding sagely. "A man must have killed fifty of the Cardinal's troops in fair fight before he was admitted to the Order of Louis. Although some unscrupulous ones gained admittance by including the Cardinal's men they ran down with their horses in their tally. Remember, Athos, Coquelin, the Briton, was such a rogue. If the truth were known, the scoundrel didn't kill half the required number in fair duels."

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"That is true," Athos nodded. "I never cared for Coquelin," he added, as an afterthought.

Phillip felt baffled and helpless. These were children, brave, gay, reckless children, and how could he make them understand the present difficult situation? They had been magnificent against the Nazis in Paris, because that simply was another fight to them, an inspiring, happy battle against the traditional enemies of their beloved France. This was very different.

"What," Athos asked, "is this business about service men?"

"They are the men who fought the war," Phillip explained. "A service man is any member of the armed forces. Now that the war is over those men who fought for our country are given first preference in jobs."

"Did we not fight?" Porthos asked indignantly.

"Of course you did," Phillip said, "but not as members of the United States armed forces. You aren't citizens of the United States. You aren't even citizens of France."

Porthos got up and put a fatherly hand on Phillip's shoulder.

"You mustn't worry about us, *mon ami*," he said. "We will take care of you."

Phillip almost groaned.

"Actually," Athos said, "I have already found a job, so you see your worries are groundless."

"You've got a job!" Phillip said. "Where?"

Impressively Athos removed a newspaper clipping from his pocket. From its creased and worn condition it was obvious that it had been read and handled considerably. With a flourishing gesture he handed it to Phillip.

PHILLIP saw that is was a section clipped from the Help Wanted column of a local newspaper, the Chicago *Express*, and his eye shifted down the list of positions listed, he finally came to one which had been circled in pencil. This advertisement read:

"Positions available for metal workers. Must have knowledge in tempering steel for blades and foils, also a knowledge of hilt design and foil balance. Apply in person."

"So you see," Athos said, "we have nothing to worry about. Who knows more about swords than we do?"

"I don't know," Phillip said wearily. "I know you can fight with swords, but can you make them? Do you know how to temper steel, design hilts and balance them? That's what this ad asks for."

Athos smiled modestly.

"There is nothing about the making and using of swords we do not know. In the good old days we made our own swords and they were unsurpassed in all France. So please do not worry anymore about us, Phillip."

"Well," Phillip said, "we won't worry any more about it now. We can talk the situation over in the morning. Now I suggest we talk of other things and plan to get a good night's sleep."

"Excellent," Porthos said, reaching happily for the bottle.

The next morning Phillip awoke with an unaccustomed dark brown taste in his mouth. He was lying on the floor, on top of his overcoat and with one blanket over him. He remembered that that had seemed the most feasible sleeping arrangement when he had gone to bed the previous night. Athos and Porthos had shared the bed, while he and Aramis, losing the toss, had turned in on the floor.

He raised himself to a sitting position, groaning slightly. He was chilled and stiff. And he had the beginnings

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of a nasty hangover. They had finished the bottle of cognac, and then nothing would do but they get another. That process had been repeated several times before they finally went to bed.

He put his hands to his aching head and looked about the room.

For a moment he didn't notice anything unusual, but when he did, he sprang to his feet in alarm.

The Musketeers were gone!

He strode across the room and jerked open the bathroom door. They weren't there, of course. He looked anxiously about the room, trying to think of where they might have gone.

The job, that was it!

But where was the newspaper clipping? That had the address of the firm that wanted swordsmiths. Maybe he could trace them, find them before they got themselves into some sort of trouble. He remembered with a shudder the first time, years before, when they had ventured out into modern society.

He looked frantically about the room. Under the bed, on top of the tables, in the closet, bathroom, in the rumpled bedclothes, but then he remembered that the clipping had been in the evening edition of the *Express*. Maybe he could call them and get the address of the firm that had posted the ad.

He hurried out to the hall phone and in a few seconds, that seemed like years to him, he was talking to a bored girl in the classified ad department.

He told her what he wanted and she said she'd do what she could, and a few minutes later he was frantically scribbling down an address that was located on the west side of the city.

It was only about a half hour's ride from his room. He didn't bother shaving, just splashed cold water on his face and hurried out.

Phillip's imagination worked overtime on the short street car ride. He knew the Musketeers and he knew the things that might happen to them in this new and bewildering environment.

With a prayer that he wasn't too late, he swung off the street car and hurried to the entrance of the small factory building which bore the same address as the ad.

HE OPENED the door and stepped into a dingy reception room, which boasted one battered desk, two rickety chairs and a calendar dated nineteen forty-three. Seated behind the desk, with a newspaper before him, was an untidy, gray-haired little man with a gray hat on his head.

"I beg your pardon," Phillip said breathelessly, "but I'm looking for some friends of mine who might have come here by mistake. One is very big and one is quite plump. I'm sure you'd remember them if they've—"

The weasel-faced man was looking at him with interest.

"What makes you think they came here by mistake?" he asked.

Phillip was stopped short. "They aren't quite what you want I'm sure," he said. "They saw an ad of yours and I think they may have come here, but—"

The little man waved his sentence aside with a small, grimy hand.

"They been here," he said.

"Where did they go?" Phillip demanded.

"Go? They ain't gone nowhere. We put 'em to work."

Phillip sat down slowly on the vacant chair, trying to get his thoughts assembled. "You put them to work," he said hoarsely.

"Sure," the little man said. "We need men. They needed the job. What's so funny about that?"

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"Could I see them a moment?" Phillip asked.

The little man frowned. "What are you so excited about? You act like there might be something funny about this deal."

"I'm—I'm just surprised, that's all," Phillip said. "Please, may I see them just a minute?"

After a moment's hesitation, during which he eyed Phillip sharply, the little man finally stood up and walked to a door leading out the rear of the office.

"Come along," he said over his shoulder.

Phillip followed him into a small shop in which six or eight men were working. There were benches along the walls, and several pieces of precision grinding equipment in the center of the floor. These were not operating. The men were bent over the benches, but Phillip noted that none of them seemed to be doing anything more important than polishing their tools. The shop in general had an untidy, unbusinesslike, idle look.

As they passed the presses in the middle of the room, Phillip saw another bench which had been hidden from sight, and at it were standing the three Musketeers, talking animatedly with a florid-faced, dark-haired man, whose beautifully tailored clothes and buttonaire seemed incongruous with the grimy atmosphere of the shop.

Athos was holding a sword, a fine gleaming blade, in his hand and the attention of the little group was centered on it. They didn't notice Phillip until he tapped Aramis on the arm.

"Sorry to disturb you," he said, "but I was worried. You should have told me where you were going."

The Musketeers looked properly downcast for a moment, but then their cheerful smiles returned.

"We thought you would worry less if we just slipped out, Phillip," Athos said, good-naturedly. "And you see? Your fears were groundless." He nodded to the impressively dressed gentleman on his right. "Soleri, may I present our friend, Phillip Poincare."

The prosperous looking Mr. Soleri extended a huge, well-manicured paw, which Phillip shook dutifully.

"Mr. Soleri has put us to work," Porthos said triumphantly. "And you with your talk of unions and service men!" He laughed cheerfully and slapped Phillip on the back.

Phillip thought he detected a slight start on the part of Mr. Soleri. Perhaps it was his imagination but when Porthos had mentioned unions and service men Mr. Soleri's twinkling, but unexpressive eyes had narrowed slightly.

"I'm very glad to hear it," Phillip said.

"We are helping him with the design of his sword," Athos said. He displayed the sword he was holding to Phillip. "This is a very bad blade. Poorly balanced, poorly tempered. It would do nicely for some farm hand to use it sticking pigs."

"Well," Mr. Soleri said, speaking for the first time, "we don't really want to use them for anything so bloodthirsty. As I explained to your friends," he went on, glancing at Phillip, "they are to be used as symbols of membership in an organization in which I'm interested. Naturally we want good looking blades, but we don't intend to fight with them."

"What are you going to fight with?" Phillip asked. He wasn't conscious until he'd spoken of the implications of his questions. But it seemed a natural enough question under the circumstances.

Mr. Soleri smiled, displaying a set of brilliant teeth. But there wasn't any humor in his voice as he said: "Rather an awkward question, I should

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say. Who is there to fight now?"

"No one, I hope," Phillip said.

"Precisely," Mr. Soleri nodded.

Phillip felt there was something wrong with the situation, but it wasn't anything he could put his finger on. Mr. Soleri seemed to be on the level, but it simply wasn't reasonable that the Musketeers, without references, without union cards, without even citizenship papers, should find a job so easily.

"Have you," he asked Athos, "made any arrangements with the union?"

Athos shrugged indifferently.

"It is not necessary. Mr. Soleri has taken care of everything for us."

"And now," Mr. Soleri said, with a bland smile, "I think it's time to get to work. Will you excuse us, Mr. Poincare?"

Phillip felt the unmistakable touch of the brush-off and there was nothing he could do but make as graceful an exit as possible.

HE SPENT the day in his room, obsessed with a vague, intangible worry. When he heard the tramp of the Musketeers on the stairway he felt a quick surge of relief.

"Is everything all right?" was his first question, as they entered the room.

"But of course," Athos said.

Porthos poured himself a drink from the remains of the cognac and sat down tiredly.

"We must tell Phillip," he said. "There is no point in deceiving him."

"What happened?" Phillip asked.

"Our plant is on strike," Athos said. "This afternoon a gentleman from the unions came and told us all that we must stop working. Everyone left but us."

Phillip shook his head. He knew with a dull certainty that the rest of the story was not going to be good.

"Go on," he said.

"Well," Athos said, crossing his legs, "about a half hour after that three men came in the shop. They were big, capable looking fellows. They told us that we must stop working. Porthos, Aramis and I were busy. We told them to go away. They again insisted we stop." He paused and lifted one shoulder eloquently.

"What happened then?"

Porthos set his glass down with a bang.

"What do you think? We threw the dogs out into the street. We are honest men, working hard, and they tell us we must not work. We threw them out and went back to our work."

"This is bad," Phillip said.

"And why?" asked Porthos. "Can we not work if we like?"

"I wish you'd try to understand," Phillip said. "There is an industrial and economic arrangement in this country that has been developed by a lawful, democratic process. You can't just barge in and do things as you please."

"Mr. Soleri told us about the unions," Porthos said darkly.

"What did he tell you?" Phillip asked.

"The truth," Porthos went on. "He told us they were a great evil, that they must be destroyed, so honest men could work when and where they wanted."

"He told you all that, did he?" Phillip said thoughtfully.

"Yes," Athos said. He frowned down at the floor. "I did not like him at first, but he has treated us decently. And he seems to be speaking the truth."

"We have jobs," Porthos said, "and we are going to keep them."

"You can't go back to work," Phillip cried. "Not until the strike is over. You'd be beaten to pulps if you tried."

Phillip realized instantly that he'd said the wrong thing. Such an ap-

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proach would only strengthen them in their determination.

"We have never dodged a fight," Porthos growled.

"We will be at work in the morning," Athos said, with quiet finality.

Phillip knew there was no point arguing with them. They knew what they were going to do. But he also knew what he was going to do.

THE next morning he awoke early, dressed and left the house before his friends were stirring. It was a cold, raw morning, still dark.

Phillip's first stop was an all-night drug store in the neighborhood, where he made two telephone calls. It took a long time to get the parties he wanted, and longer still to explain his story and when he finished the first streaks of dawn were feeling their way through the dark.

He called a cab then and drank two cups of coffee while he was waiting for it. He glanced at his watch when the cab arrived. It was going to be close.

He gave the driver an address and told him to hurry . . .

The address was a middle-class apartment building on Chicago's North side. Phillip rang and the buzzer sounded immediately. He started up the steps and a voice said, "Second floor."

At the second floor a door was open, and a man stood in the doorway. He had obviously been dressing hurriedly when Phillip rang. His tie was still draped over his shoulder and his graying hair had been given a quick brushing which hadn't completely removed its sleep-tousled look. He was a tall, slender man with square shoulders and a lean waist. He might have been forty-five, but he looked in excellent shape. His face was tanned and his hair had once been black but now it was streaked with gray.

"Are you Poincare, the man who phoned me a while ago?" he asked.

Phillip nodded. "And you're Nelson, business agent of the Metal Workers, Local 3000?"

"Come in," Nelson said. "We haven't too much time to talk."

Phillip followed him into a neatly furnished living room and took a chair. Nelson picked up a paper from a coffee table and handed it to him.

"This is the morning paper. Your friends got quite a bit of publicity out of that deal yesterday afternoon."

Phillip spread the paper and read a front page story on the fight the Musketeers had had with the agents of the Union. The story was a lurid, overemphasized account, which gave the impression that this was a very mild example of incidents which were occurring all over the country.

"This is just the kind of thing the country can't stand right now," Nelson said. "Things are bad enough without publicity like this. Now tell me about these friends of yours and do it quickly. If they intend to go to work this morning—" He broke off and started tying his tie. "Tell me on the way. We've got to prevent them from crossing that picket line at all costs."

Racing across the city in Nelson's car, Phillip told him as much as he could. He explained that the Musketeers were expatriated Frenchmen, who had wound up in America as the result of the war. They didn't understand conditions in America. They were not trying to cause trouble. They were just simple men who wanted to work and couldn't understand why anyone should tell them they shouldn't.

Nelson listened and nodded.

"I hope I can talk some sense into their heads," he said. "I may be able to if—"

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"If what?" Phillip said.

"If we get there on time," Nelson said grimly.

They were nearing the address now. The car swung around the last corner on two wheels and a prayer. Ahead was the small building that housed the company where the Musketeers had gone to work. And Phillip's heart sank as he saw the battle that was raging before the entrance.

There were at least a dozen men fighting in a rocking, swaying group, in the middle of which Phillip could make out the battling figures of the Musketeers.

"We're too late," he groaned.

Nelson braked his car to a skidding halt.

"Maybe not," he snapped. "Follow me."

PHILLIP piled out of the car and raced after Nelson's tall figure. Nelson was shouting as he hit the fringes of the struggling group, but his voice was lost in the clamor of shouting voices.

Phillip saw Porthos, with a wide happy smile on his face, pick up one of the men, lift him high above his head and hurl him straight at two others who were trying to close in. The man's flying figure hit the other two like a battering ram, sending them sprawling.

This created a breach in the solid wall of battling human figures and, before it could close, Phillip darted in and grabbed Porthos by the arm.

"Stop!" he shouted.

Porthos shook him aside impatiently.

"Stop!" he bellowed. "I am only starting on these dogs."

But Nelson had been able by this time to get the attention of the attacking union men. With a crisp order that snapped like a cracking whip he backed them away from the Musketeers, but their angry flushed faces made it anybody's guess how long his authority would restrain them.

The Musketeers stood grimly silent, fists doubled, waiting and ready for any development. The air was charged and tense.

Nelson turned to Phillip.

"Can you do anything with them?" he asked.

"I'll try," Phillip said. He turned slowly to the Musketeers. "I want you to listen a moment to me, my friends. Then you may do what you like."

"The time for talking is over," Athos said, almost gently.

"Then just listen," Phillip said. "This man with me is honest. He wants to say a few words to you. I want you to listen to him. Not because it will change your minds or keep you out of trouble. And not because it is right. But I ask you to listen simply as a favor to me."

Porthos scowled and looked at the ground.

"You take an unfair advantage of us, Phillip," he said. "How can we refuse you a favor?"

Athos sighed. "The only appeal that would avail against our anger and he must use it."

Nelson turned to the strikers.

"It's all right now, men. Break it up."

When they had drifted back to their picket line he said to the Musketeers, "You didn't need us to stop the fight. You'd have ended it yourselves in a few more minutes."

Phillip thanked his stars that Nelson apparently was a better than average psychologist. That touch of flattery would do more to soften the Musketeers than a two-hour lecture based on reason and logic.

The Musketeers, pleased as always when their fighting prowess was recog-

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nized, smirked at each other like big kids. It was obvious that they were ready to recognize Nelson as a man of discernment, at least.

Nelson began talking to them. He wasn't eloquent, but he managed to be impressive, something which was far more difficult. He didn't talk about Labor and Capital. He simply talked about human beings. And he made his point.

When he stopped talking Phillip could tell from the faces of the Musketeers that they were impressed.

"What," Athos said slowly, "do you wish us to do?"

Nelson smiled. "I was hoping you would ask that. I'm not sure but I think this outfit you started to work with is far from being on the level. I think they're a front for someone bigger who is interested in promoting discord between labor and capital. But you can help us. Your escapades yesterday and this little fracas just now haven't helped things. So this is what I've got in mind. There is a union rally tonight and I'd like you all to be there, say a few words. I'll see that the newspapers are there, and if you can do a good job it will help a lot to counteract the bad publicity we're going to get because of this thing this morning and the deal yesterday. How about it?"

"Will there be food?" Porthos asked.

"And drink?" asked Aramis.

"We will be there," Athos said. "I am still confused but I want to understand and do right."

"Good," Nelson said. He gave Phillip a card with an address on it. "Will you see that they are there before eight?"

"With pleasure," said Phillip.

THEY left Phillip's room at seven, and because of the importance of the evening, Phillip felt justified in taking a cab. They arrived at the union hall with time to spare.

The space in front of the hall was crowded and the driver had to let them out almost a block from the entrance. The neighborhood was not of the best and the street was dark.

The Musketeers were in a jubilant mood. They were clean shaven, well pressed, and all their debonair dash had returned. The prospects of food and drink and the realization that they were now on the right side had cheered immensely.

"I will speak to them," Porthos said. "I will bring tears to their eyes as I tell them of our sad betrayal."

Aramis made an unpleasant sound with pursed lips.

"You were always a posturing fool," he said caustically. "You will do best to remain silent while Athos speaks."

Porthos was rumbling an indignant reply which was interrupted when a small man hurrying along in the opposite direction collided with him.

"Beg your pardon," he said. "Didn't see you coming. Can I borrow a match from any of you gentlemen?"

The Musketeers and Phillip had been walking abreast on the sidewalk and they all stopped.

"I have a match," Phillip said. He took a folder of matches from his pocket and handed them to the man.

The man took the matches but made no effort to light one.

"Going to the union meeting?" he asked.

"Yes," Porthos said. "I am going to talk to them. I am going to tell them—"

"Shut up," Aramis said disgustedly. "He is not interested in what you are going to do."

The little man chuckled. "Oh, but I am," he said.

Phillip felt a sudden warning of

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danger.

"Let's be getting along," he said.

"Yes, it's about time," the little man said. He tore a match from the packet and struck it deliberately.

Later Phillip realized it must have been a signal.

For as the tiny flame spurted into the blackness a figure materialized behind Porthos, an arm raised, descended viciously, and Phillip heard a thudding smack, and then Porthos pitched forward, groaning.

Athos wheeled and leaped back as a sudden rush of figures closed in on them. Phillip never struck a blow, and he didn't see the man who struck him. He was hit from behind, a hard, paralyzing blow that set off a pin-wheeling display of pyrotechnics in his skull. He remembered falling, trying to strike out at the blackness that was sweeping him. And that was all. . . .

PAIN that stabbed the base of his skull drove away the blackness. He opened his eyes slowly. For an instant they wouldn't focus. Then he discovered that he was half-sitting, half-lying in a soft chair, and that his arms were bound to his sides. Twisting his head to one side he saw that Athos, Porthos and Aramis were similarly secured.

Athos was shaking his head groggily from side to side, but the other two were still unconscious.

"Where are we?" Phillip asked stupidly.

Athos screwed his eyes tight, then opened them with an effort.

"I was going to ask you the same thing," he muttered.

Phillip glanced around the room, saw that it was large, luxuriously furnished, with huge windows across one entire wall, probably the street side.

The furniture was done in tan, the carpet was the color of an expensive camel's hair coat and there was a small bar, a baby grand piano, and a combination record-player and radio that looked big enough to live in. The whole set-up looked like money. Big money.

While he was trying to force his aching head to think, a door opened quietly and several men drifted into the room. They were quiet, nondescript types in gray suits. They wore their hats, and their right hands, Phillip noticed, stayed close to their coat pockets.

Following them, grinning expansively, was Mr. Soleri, as beautifully dressed as ever, his black hair pomaded tight against his skull.

"Nice to see you all again," he said. He glanced at Porthos' and Aramis' unconscious figures and pursed his lips sympathetically. "Too bad your friends haven't come around yet."

"You will regret what you have done," Athos said evenly. "That you may consider a promise."

"I don't think so," Mr. Soleri said, as if the matter didn't interest him one way or the other.

"What is the idea of all this?" Phillip asked.

"It's really quite simple," Soleri said. He took an expensive cigar from his coat pocket and lit it carefully. "Your interference made all the strong-arm tactics inevitable. I hired your friends because they seemed stupid enough to believe anything I told them. My ambitions weren't high. I simply wanted to create a little disturbance, get a little publicity, that's all. Things were working beautifully until you came along this morning and talked them out of going to work. That wasn't so bad but when I learned they were going to have a hearts and flowers reunion at the rally tonight I simply had to prevent it. That would have undone a lot of the good work. So that's why you're here.

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And I don't know quite what to do with you."

"What do you get out of causing trouble?" Phillip asked.

"Nothing, nothing at all," Soleri said blandly. "I am a free agent, so to speak. The organization wants certain jobs done and I do the work. They want a little strike trouble here, a bit of anti-semitism in the next place, a few negroes lynched somewhere else. I try and arrange things, that's all."

He strolled to the wall and took down a sword, one very similar to that which Phillip had seen the day before at the machine shop.

"This is the symbol of their order," he said. "Perhaps you didn't notice, but there's a striking snake curling very cleverly toward the hilt. No one is familiar with it today, but tomorrow it might become quite popular. After all, the swastika took a few years to catch one. Maybe it's the coming thing, who knows? There is a lot of smart money behind it and smart money generally gets what it wants. But to get back to our immediate problem. What am I going to do with you people? There will be quite a hue and cry when the union realizes you aren't going to attend their little love feast. That's well and good, but when it is discovered that I kidnaped you it will not be so good." He paused and smiled reflectively. "Now if you had been so obliging as to get yourself killed by a few hot headed union men that would have been perfect. Public opinion wouldn't like that a bit. It would be quite a mess. Just the thing we want." He was still smiling as he said, "we must see if we can't arrange something like that."

"You're out of date," Phillip said. "You won't get away with it."

"Maybe," Soleri said.

He turned to one of his men.

"Tony, get out the car," he said.

THE man addressed as Tony nodded silently and left, closing the door behind him.

Phillip knew they didn't have much chance of getting out of this spot, but he had seen too much in Paris to let his worry show on his face. There was a thick silence in the room while they waited for Tony to return. Soleri licked the tip of his cigar and kept his eyes fixed dreamily on its glowing tip. His men leaned against the walls and waited.

The door behind Soleri opened.

He said, "car ready?"

The man in the doorway wasn't Tony. He wore a dark suit, snap brim hat and his lean face was as bright as a flashing sword. In his hand he held a short, very business-like automatic.

He said, "I wouldn't do anything suddenly, gentlemen. It would please me to shoot you all very quickly."

Soleri turned slowly, his jaw dropping with astonishment.

Athos and Phillip were grinning widely. Phillip hadn't recognized the new arrival immediately, and even now he couldn't believe his eyes; couldn't believe that *D'Artagnan,* the smiling, reckless, *D'Artagnan,* was actually standing in the room.

"*Bravo, mon ami,*" Athos cried.

D'Artagnan took his eyes from Soleri long enough to glance at the bound figures of the Musketeers and Phillip. "As usual," he sighed, "if I leave you *enfants* for a minute you are in trouble."

Soleri shifted suddenly. The sword he held in his hand leaped forward, driving like a striking snake at D'Artagnan's heart.

D'Artagnan's lithe body moved faster. He parried the thrust with the barrel of his automatic, causing it to slide harmlessly past him. Then he stepped in close and swung the gun like a club.

(Concluded on page 164)

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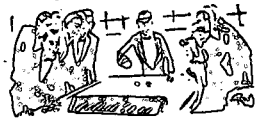

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(Concluded from page 162)

The blow caught Soleri on the forehead. The sword fell from his fingers. He staggered forward pressing his hands to his face, knees buckling.

His henchmen made swift moves for their pockets but *D'Artagnan* had swung the gun to cover them. And the reckless smile was gone from his face, leaving it cold and hard.

"I wouldn't," he said.

They didn't. Hands inches from guns, they froze.

There was a sudden battering on the front door.

D'Artagnan backed to the door, opened it and stepped aside. Several policemen, two or three plain-clothes men and Nelson charged into the room.

"It is all over," *D'Artagnan* said.

One of the plain-clothes men glared at him. "You were supposed to wait for us to come in the front way before you started anything."

D'Artagnan hung his head guiltily.

"I'm afraid I let my excitement carry me away," he said.

Nelson untied Phillip while the policemen were releasing the Musketeers. "We traced you back to your room and met this young friend of yours. He wanted to come along. We suspected Soleri might have been the one who kidnaped you, so we made a bee-line for here. He didn't get rid of the evidence fast enough."

"He was trying to," Phillip said.

"I've called the FBI," Nelson said. "They'll crack Soleri wide open and find out who's behind him. And I want to put you and your friends to work. I'll give you the details later. Just in brief I want you to go on a speaking tour, telling just what happened yesterday and today. It might wake some people up to the fact that while the war is over there's still work ahead."

"Sounds fine," Phillip said.

* * *

A week later Phillip and the Musketeers were sitting in quiet luxury in what had formerly been Soleri's apartment, sipping cognac.

"So you see," Porthos was saying, "you were wrong. We have this lovely apartment, beautiful food and drink and we are even working. What is difficult about America? It is wonderful, it is magnificent! It has no difficulties at all."

At that moment the doorbell rang. Athos opend the door and a uniformed messenger handed him four bulky forms.

"Mr. Nelson sent these over," he said.

Athos looked at them with a frown. Then he shrugged and tossed them on a table. "Nothing to worry about," he said.

"What was it?" Phillip asked.

Athos shrugged. "I don't know. But it cannot be bad. Everything here is good." He picked up the forms again and read aloud, "Income Tax Return —," He tossed them back on the table. "There's a lot more writing but it isn't important."

"Of course not," Porthos said. He lifted his glass and then glanced sharply at Phillip.

"What are you laughing about?"

THE END

In the BIG MAY ISSUE of MAMMOTH WESTERN:
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READER'S PAGE

THE EYES HAVE IT

Sirs:

The descriptions of eyes in "Toka Fights The Big Cats" were so numerous that counting them was like counting the beans in a quart jar. Here are a few examples:

...her gray eyes iced...
...baleful yellow eyes...
...malevolent yellow eyes...
...eyes gleamed...
...eyes narrowed...
...bloodshot green eyes...
...yellow eyes were searching...
...awakening hope kindled in Vola's eyes...
...worry revealed in his eye...
...his eyes dark and dancing...
...blazing yellow eyes...
...rolled his noting eyes...
...Vola's regal eyes...
...superkeen eyes...
...eyes wary...
...eyes included all...
...lust-filled green eyes...
...trained eyes...
...eyes smouldered...
...eyes amused...
...casually eyed...
...eyes held his...
...he danced his eyes to hers...
...her gray eyes danced...
...eye filled with happiness...

I think, if you multiply by two you'll get a rough idea of how many eyes there were in the story. But don't get me wrong, I'm not trying to criticize the story itself—it ranked super with me! I just got a kick out of underlining each "eye" in the story. Any optician would have been in seventh heaven among so many eyes. Actually, as far as the story went, I compared it to "Tarzan" and "Toka" actually won!

Thanks for welcoming me into your fold. I've already received many letters from readers who agreed with my letter in the December issue of FA. Keep 'em coming, pals!

Mrs. Muriel E. Eddy,
125 Pearl St.,
Providence 7, R. I.

Glad you liked the "Toka" novel so well, Muriel, even with all those eyes staring out at you! And keep your letters coming.....Ed.

THAT DEVASTATING COVER!

Sirs:

I have read FA & AS for quite a long time, but this is my first letter to you. That devastatingly beautiful cover on the January issue of FA is too beautiful for words. It is the most beautiful illustration I've ever seen—or hope too. My congratulations to artist Robert Gibson Jones. And the story, "Secret Of The Serpent" was great. I always enjoy FA to the utmost.

Franklin M. Dietz, Jr.,
Box A,
Kings Pk., L. I., N. Y.

When you throw bushels of praise at Bob Jones for his fine work you only echo our own sentiments—and the rest of our readers. The Ziff-Davis pulps have the best artists in the business—and Jones is the best of the best.....Ed.

FACT VERSUS FICTION

Sirs:

Round and round we go. What have we got here anyway, a literary debate society? The letter page is fast becoming more interesting than the stories. By the way, is the percentage of pro and con letters printed the same as the percentage sent in? I notice the fans are still up in the air about Shaver. I reserve my opinion for *Amazing Stories*, but if you really want to prove anything, why not print some facts that are not subject to the public's fickle imagination? A little publicity and it soon becomes impossible to distinguish fact from fiction. Sooner or later someone is going to build a fire under someone else, then we'll see some action.

As to the December issue, I'll sit back safe at home and stick my neck out. In my not so humble opinion "Toka Fights The Big Cats" was a definite let-down. At times it tottered on the brink of actually being corny. Pelkie is in no danger of being ousted from Olympus, as many of the passages in TFBC will testify, but the story is loose, as if it had been hastily written. More intrepid souls can decide the merits of the rest of the stories, except for "The Hands Of Ali Jinnah" which I must regard as a highly polished piece of writing. If you want opinions wholesale, you'll hear from me again.

Frederic Carrol,
708 S. Brighton,
Dallas, Texas.

First of all, Fred, in regards to Shaver and his famous "Shaver Mystery," the proof, we understand, is being presented in another magazine, which no longer makes the "Shaver Mystery" fiction, so AS and FA are turning over the entire "Shaver Mystery" to the Shaver Mystery Club,

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headed by Dick Shaver and Chester S. Geier at 2414 Lawrence Avenue, Chicago. So if you want to get to the root of the matter we suggest that you, and any other fans interested, get in touch with Geier and the club.

We're a little bit surprised that you felt that "Toka" was a let-down. But we're glad that you did like parts of the story and still have Pelkie on "Olympus." As to Dwight Swain's yarn, yes, it was a nice job of writing, as most of Dwight's work has proven to be. And we'd like to add that we like your wholesale opinions.....Ed.

LET'S GO BACK A BIT

Sirs:

This is the first chance I've had in a long time to write you so I'm going as far back as the January 1947 issue of FA and pay tribute to a great novel, "Princess Of The Sea" by Don Wilcox. I thought this was the best novel I have read in years. Since then, another novel, "The Tale Of The Red Dwarf" by Shaver, was a swell story too.

As I see in the issues of this past year, the fans do a lot of complimenting on the authors, but few say anything about the artists, like Robert Gibson Jones. His painting for "Princess Of The Sea" and "Tale Of The Red Dwarf" were, well, sometimes I think it takes more imagination to paint those pictures than to write the novels. The painting for "The Red Dwarf" was wonderful—no, sensational—no, miraculous!

I certainly wish I had the imagination Mr. Jones has. I certainly wouldn't be writing letters—I'd be receiving them!

Irma Bernarcle,
4541 N. Racine Ave.,
Chicago 40, Ill.

Very well stated, Irma, and let us hear from you again soon .....Ed.

STICK TO THE "CLASSICS"

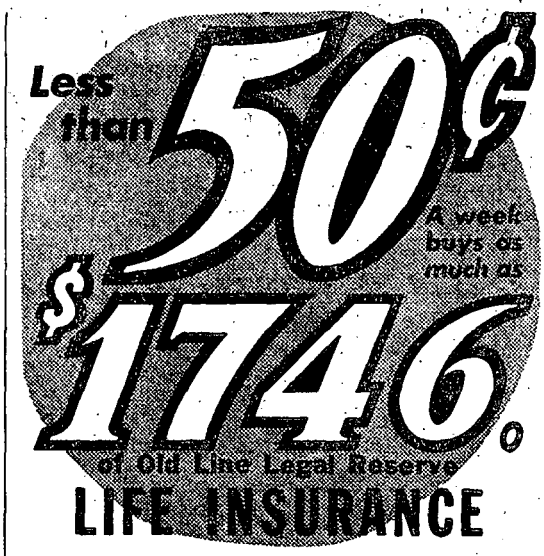
Sirs:

I have been reading science-fiction for over twenty years. It's the only type of reading I do like. Lately I have noticed a vast improvement in FA and AS. Dick Shaver and Rog Phillips are the best thing that have happened to Ziff-Davis in years. But—if you had a juvenile magazine for 7 year olds then you could put in such trash as "Toffee," "Peter Backs A Punch," "Lefty Feep," and "Toka."

Stick to the classics and not just a planetary spaceship background. The science articles are fine. The covers ditto.

Elwood E. Shippy,
Rt. No. 2,
Cuyahoga Falls, O.

Gosh, Elwood, how can you say that the stories you mentioned are trash? They were some of the best all-around fantasy yarns to come along in a long time. And frankly, we don't exactly know what you mean by classics. How do the rest of you readers feel about this?.....Ed.



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SCIENTIFIC ODDITIES

By LYNN STANDISH

FLYING LIZARDS

FLYING lizards, scientifically known as Pterodactyles, were common during the ice age.. Skeletons have been found of some that were no bigger than robins and others with wing spreads of twenty-five feet. Their wings were smooth with no hair or feathers. They had long tails and were small boned. Even the largest probably didn't weigh more than twenty-five pounds.

The skulls that have been found show that they had large eye sockets. Their wings were like an arm with five long bony fingers. At the bend of the wing there were three bones like claws that helped the lizard to cling to trees. The name "Pterodactyl" which means "finger wing" was given to them because of the long, slender finger bone in the wing.

* * *

RED GIANTS

THE true stars are faraway suns. They are many times distant as our own sun, some are smaller and some are much larger. A very bright sun in the Orion constellation, called Betelgeuse, is hundreds of times as large as the sun. An even larger one is called Antares. It is 400,000,000 miles in diameter and is the largest known star. These are both young stars, reddish in color and might be called "young red giants." They are composed of burning gases that are lighter than air. As millions of years go by, they will condense and become smaller, each cubic foot will weight more. They will also become lighter colored as they grow older. Most stars start out with a reddish color changing to orange then yellow. When the star is in its prime it is white or blue-white. After remaining white for several million years it starts to turn back through the yellows to red. In its last stages, it is much smaller than when it was young, and practically solid. When it is at last a feeble, red old star, its little light goes out, and it becomes a cinder which goes whirling through space. Most of these cinders are larger than earth. Our sun is a star just a bit past middle age, but its light and heat will last millions of years yet.

THE WIRE CROW'S NEST

IN THE museum in Calcutta there is a crow's nest formed of small pieces of wire which were used to hold the corks on soda-water bottles. Many garden parties were given in India in certain seasons of the year. After playing tennis or other games the guests would refresh themselves with pop. The wires were thrown away. One day a man was walking in the Eden Gardens in Calcutta when he saw what he thought was an especially well-made crow's nest in a tree; so he climbed the tree and found to his surprise that it was made of pieces of wire bent and twisted in such a way to make the most beautiful nest. The inside was neatly lined with soft warm feathers and it was hard to believe that anything so neatly done could have been made like that by a crow.

* * *

CONCEPTIONS OF THE SKY

THE early Egyptians regarded the sky as a flat metal plate or slab, with each end resting on a mountain. The mountain of sunrise, Bakhau, on one end and the mountain of sunset, Manu, on the other. In the Pyramid texts, the sky was described as a rectangular shape, each corner resting on a pillar. These pillars were thought to be sceptres of the gods who presided over the four corners of heaven. At a later date they got the idea that the sky needed some support in the middle as well as at the corners. The god whom they believed acted as center prop was called Heh.

In another Egyptian myth, the heavens were shaped like a man's head. The sun and the moon were his eyes, and his hair supported the sky. Another idea was that the goddess Nut, who personified the upper regions, formed the shape of the heavens by arching her body over the earth and resting her weight on her hands and feet. Sometimes they place the god, Shu, beneath her to help hold her up. The stars were scattered over her body, and the people called her "the Lady of Heaven." In all the paintings of her, she is painted blue as the sky she personifies.

* * *

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LEAF COLORING

EACH fall the pattern of most plants' chemistry changes and yields new products which brighten the autumn landscape. For a few weeks we have vivid yellows and reds on the trees and shrubs that are about to lose their leaves for a long winter's rest. These are, in the cells of the plant leaf, tiny plastids that are arranged like green jewels so as to catch the light. In these, is the green plant pigment called chlorophyl, which accelerates the food-producing chemistry of the plant. Out-done by the chlorophyl's green are two other pigments in smaller amounts. One called xanthrophyl, is yellowish, and the other, carotin, is red or orange. As the leaf begins to lose its strength, the chlorophyl dies out and the two other more hardy pigments come out, dressing the plant in its new fall colors.

A third group of pigments called the anthrocyanins, which give leaves the deeper red and purple, is not found in most plants till late fall. These colors are dissolved in the watery sap of the plant cells. These anthrocyanin plant cells are only produced in the hot sunlight. A rainy fall will dim the dark red and purple landscapes. In the fall poison ivy leaves are yellow if they are shaded and bright red if exposed to the sun.

* * *

THE CITY OF BABYLON

THE city of Babylon was surrounded by fortifications which extended 480 stadia. The wall was 150 feet high and 100 feet thick. The Euphrates split the city in half, and beneath the river was a secret passage which linked the palaces on each bank. This tunnel was constructed by Semiramis, who temporarily diverted the river into lakes. The palaces were roofed with bronze. The women's quarters were adorned with silver, and ornaments of solid gold and statuettes and golden tapestries. One chamber had a domed roof studded with sapphires which were intermingled with golden figures of the gods.

* * *

THE TALLEST GRASS

BAMBOO is a grass and not a tree even though it does grow as high as a ten story building. On the island of Ceylon it grows 120 feet high. Bamboo sometimes grows two feet a day when it is in its first weeks of growth. Of course it slows down as it becomes older, otherwise if it kept growing at that rate, it would get to be as high as the Empire State building. Some bamboos produce flowers and seeds each year, while others are one hundred before they bloom. The stalks are sometimes a foot thick. Bamboo grows best in Asia although we have some in our southern states, Africa, South America, and England. It has hundreds of uses besides making good fish poles. It is used to build homes, bridges, furniture, water pipes, etc. The Chinese eat young bamboo shoots pickled, candied, or cooked like asparagus.

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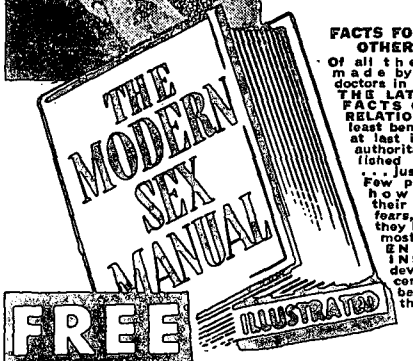

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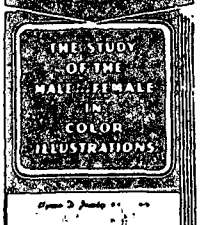

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fantastic Facts

By LEE OWENS

GREEK MYTH OF CRONUS

WHEN Cronus took the place of Uranus, the first monarch of Olympus, he took as his wife, Rhea, one of the Titan race. His mother told him that because he had overthrown Uranus, so would he be overthrown by one of his own children. He was so worried about this that he swallowed his children as soon as they were born. He swallowed five of his children like this, much to the grief of Rhea. She told Gaea, Cronus' mother, of the loss of her offspring. She was advised that next time she had a child to take a stone and wrap it in swaddling clothes as if it were a new baby and give it to Cronus to swallow, at the same time concealing the real child in some secluded spot until it reached maturity. So that is what Rhea did, and Cronus swallowed the stone thinking it was one of his children, and therefore one of his future destroyers. Rhea hid the child on the island of Crete where it was fed by the goat, Amalthea. Placed around the child were armed men who did war-dances and crashed their spears and shields together whenever he cried to drown out the sound of his wailing. Within one year the child grew to manhood. Then Gaea gave Cronus a distasteful drink that made him give up the stone he had swallowed and also the five children he had devoured—two gods and three goddesses. These young gods made war upon the elder deities, and after struggling for ten years, were victorious over them, banishing them to the dismal region of Tartarus.

* * *

SKELETON IN THE CLOSET

IN ANCIENT times it was considered necessary to make a human sacrifice to the gods before erecting a building. Since the gods were the rightful owners of the earth, they were apt to be angered if they did not receive what they demanded and they could destroy the works of man or blot out the whole earth. There is a record stating that St. Columbia found it necessary to bury St. Oran alive beneath the foundation of his monastery, in order to propitiate the spirits of the soil who demolished at night all that had been built during the day.

In England during the Middle Ages, the saying, "Every man has a skeleton in his closet," was not merely a figure of speech. There were many stories of faithless monks and nuns being walled up alive. In North Devon, the parish church was restored in 1845. While taking down one of the walls, a skeleton was found imbedded in stone and mortar. The body appeared to have been buried alive, hurriedly, for there was a mass of mortar over its mouth and stones were heaped up around the corpse. The rest of the wall had been built properly.

There are many other accounts of skeletons being found in walls, for the superstition that walls would not stand without the sacrifice of a human victim existed in various parts of Germany, and among the Celts, Slavs, Teutons, and Northmen. There is an authentic record of Geronimo of Oran who was walled up in the gate Bab-el-Oved in 1569, in Algiers.

* * *

THE BURRY MAN

THE BURRY MAN represents the spirit of vegetation, the festival of which has survived down through the years. In South Queensferry, near Edinburgh, an annual ceremony was held, the chief participant being known as the "Burry Man." This ceremony was held to commemorate the passage of Malcolm Canmore and Queen Margaret to and from Edinburgh and Dunfermline. It can be traced back before the battle of Falkirk (1746). It took place before the annual fair. The Burry Man was chosen, usually a stout man, and he was dressed in loose fitting flannels with his arms, face and legs thickly covered with burrs. He carried two staves, and these as well as his hands were adorned with beautiful flowers. In this attirement he was led from door to door by two young assistants. The owners came out and gave him money and cheered him on to the next home. Sometimes two persons were selected and dressed up like royalty, one representing the "King" and the other the "Queen," in allusion to the passage of the king and queen through the borough. The people believed that when this custom was abandoned, misfortune would come to the town.

The tree or plant-life spirit was often repre-

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sented by a man-like shape in folk festivals. In Bohemia, it was the custom for the girls of the village to go into the woods on the fourth Sunday in Lent and cut down a tree. They would then fasten this young tree to a puppet dressed in white clothes to look like a woman, and take the whole thing through the streets of the village, collecting gratuities and singing that they bring summer into the village. Summer is represented as the spirit of vegetation, returning or reviving.

In Alsace, a little girl is chosen whom they call "Little May Rose," and she is dressed in white and carries a small may-tree covered with ribbons. She and her companions go through the streets collecting gifts, singing as they go. In Lithuania the boys choose the prettiest girl, and wrap her in birch branches and call her the spirit of May. In Brie, in the Ile de France, a young boy is clad in leaves and is called "Father May." In Bavaria, on the 2nd of May, a man is covered with straw to impersonate a sheaf, and then he dances around a tree in front of the local tavern. Later the townspeople all join in a procession through the streets which are adorned with birch branches. In Carinthia, a young man is clothed in birch branches and called "Green George." In England, they have "Jack-in-the-Green," who is covered with a wicker frame-work on to which is fastened holly and ivy, and flowers and ribbons. In Thuringia, the children twine leaves around one of their playmates till the child is completely covered. Then they lead him through the streets so that he will not stumble and call him their "Little Leaf Man."

* * *

HILL OF THE SAGES

MANY years ago Apollonius and his party visted the land of the Brahmins. The occult wisdom of these sages was the common source from which yogin, mahatma, and conjuring fakir have drawn.

Four days Apollonius and his men journeyed across fertile country before they came to the stronghold of the sages. When they arrived, their guide expressed fear and refused to go any further. A messenger came down from the hill to meet them. He was of dusky complexion and between his eyes was a brilliant crescent-shaped mark. He wore a golden anchor as a badge. The messenger informed them that only Apollonius could accompany him to the stronghold of sorcery.

The hill upon which the Brahmins lived was about the same height as the Athenian Acropolis, and the top of it was shrouded by a mist which entirely obscured the walls from view. Going up the southern side of the hill, Apollonius came upon a well above which there shimmered a deep blue light which at noon went higher in the sky and became colored like a rainbow.

Near the well was a fiery crater which produced a lead-colored flame with neither smoke nor odor. The well was called the Well of Testing, and the fire was the Fire of Pardon. Near by were two

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jars filled with black stones. One was the Jar of the Winds and the other was the Jar of the Rains.

The very top of the hill was regarded as the navel of the earth, and upon it fire was worshipped with mystic rites. Fire was derived from the sun, to which a hymn of worship was sung each day at noon.

Apollonius was received by the sages who were seated upon chairs of black copper. The chief Brahmin was on a higher seat than the rest. After a philosophic discussion, Apollonius proceeded with the Brahmins to a temple of worship, where in the course of their worship they struck their rods three times upon the ground and were lifted some distance into space. Their rods were their magic wands.

LATER, the King came to take counsel with the Sages. He entered majestically, ablaze with gold and jewels, accompanied by his brother and his son. Iarchas, in a formal address, bade the King to take food. Four tripods immediately moved forward by their own power. Upon them were cup-bearers of black brass which resembled the figures of youth. The earth magically caused soft green grass to be under foot. Dried fruit, bread and vegetables were set before the royal guest and Apollonius by these magical automata. Two tripods flowed with wine and the other two furnished hot and cold water. Vessels and goblets made from enormous jewels were offered to the guests by bronze cup-bearers.

Apollonius was told by the Brahmins that Cosmos was composed of five elements. Besides water, air, earth, and sky, there is ether which was regarded as the element of which the gods were made, for just as mortal creatures inhale air, the immortal and divine natures inhale ether. When Apollonius asked which of the elements came first, he was told that they were simultaneous for no living thing is born by degrees. They regarded the universe as a living creature, for it engenders all living things; and both male and female for by commerce with itself, it fulfills the role of both father and mother, and brings forth living creatures. In the words of Iarchas to Apollonius we can catch a glimpse of their alchemistic philosophy: "Respecting the stone which attracts and binds to itself other stones, you must not be sceptical; for you may see the stone yourself if you will, and admire its properties. The largest specimen is of the size of the finger-nail, and it is conceived in the hollow of the earth at a depth of four fathoms; but it is endowed with such force that the earth swells and breaks open in many places where the stone is . . ." In order to secure this stone, Apollonius was told that one must employ the most subtle uses of science. Only the Brahmins could do that by the performance of certain rites and by uttering certain forms of words. Iarchas told him that in the night-time "it glows like fire, for it is red and emits rays; and if you look at it, it smites

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your eyes with a thousand glints and gleams. And this light within it is the spirit of a mysterious power, for it absorbs to itself everything in its neighborhood." This account is of interest, for the stone possessed by the Adept Trautmansdorf was stated by those alleged to have seen it, to have been the size of a bean, of garnet-red color, and to have emitted light in the dark. Iarchas then showed the stone, the pentarbe, to Apollonius, and all that it was capable of performing. He also gave him seven mystic rings which were named for the seven stars, and Apollonius wore a different one for each day of the week. During his visit with the Brahmins, he enacted wonderful cures for the lame, for the blind, and for the possessed. Apollonius returned to Greece where his subsequent divinations, including the plague of Ephesus, calling up of spirits, and many miraculous cures, were numerous.

* * *

EGYPTIAN ENCHANTMENT

EGYPT was the wonderland of the ancient world, and the Nile land is still the center of supernatural happenings. The Koran tells us that Egypt is inhabited by a vast number of ginn. Like human beings, they are born, grow old and die. They are male and female, black or white, some of high mentality and some of low station. Some are free and some are slaves, some are Moslems and some Christians. In fact they are just like men, except that they have no flesh or blood, and they live perhaps three hundred years.

They believed that each child has a companion ginn, born at the same instant. This ginn, or Karina, is female if a male child is born, and male in the case of a female. If a child dies in infancy, it is said that the baby has been killed by his Karina. The Karina was often given in the official death registers as the cause of death. Usually the ginn were invisible but they could put themselves into all sorts of forms resembling men, animals, and monsters. It was difficult to recognize them in these vapoury forms, but they could be distinguished by their perpendicular eyes. The art of calling out these ginn in order to get rid of them or to make them work for you, was practiced throughout the Moslem world by many men and women. By using the ginn, those acquainted with occult lore could perform miracles. Most of these sorcerers were poor men, for it is said that self denial is necessary with a pact with the ginn. Some sorcerers of Egypt are said to have been married to ginnee, or female ginn, and performed their miracles through their supernatural spouses. A man suspected of being married to a ginnee appeared in Egypt in the early nineteenth century. He said his name was Säid Abd-el-Rahmán el Adàros, and claimed that he came from India. He sailed up the Nile with a lovely ship and large retinue, and said that he wished to travel in the Sudan. Eye-witnesses said they saw him take

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money from under the carpet whenever he wished and that he could change silver coins into gold ones. This man was taken before the government and declared to be a sorcerer and was banished from the country.

One Moslem authority said that it was dangerous for a Christian to call up a Moslem ginn, for the ginn will avenge himself for this summons and immediately put the Christian to death.

THE magic books of the East tell how to gain the affections of another person; to awake at will; to unfasten chains; to recapture an escaped slave; to keep a wife faithful; to cause the belly of a thief to swell up; to discover buried treasure; to call upon ginn; to find pieces of gold under your pillow. In order to communicate with the ginn it is necessary to fast for seven days, and cleanse the body and clothes. Then one should read the chapter of the Koran, "the Angel," to the word "hazir" fourteen times after the evening prayer; then pray with four genuflections, uttering the "fatha" seven times at each, and on the seventh night after you have read the chapter fourteen times, ask of God whatever you wish. The ginn, who are servants of this chapter, will appear and give you whatever information you need concerning the treasure and will tell you how to obtain it.

There were love charms and magic mirror charms which enable you to see in the mirror any individual you want, no matter if this person is living or dead.

There is an account of a case of magic in Cairo during the last century which shows what a great degree of faith the Egyptians had in the art of enchantment. Moustafa Ed-Digwee, chief secretary in the Cadi's court in Cairo, was put out of his office and replaced by another person named Moustafa, who had formerly been a money changer. The first Moustafa sent a petition to the Pasha, asking to be reinstated; but before he received an answer he was afflicted with a severe illness which he laid to the enchantment. He believed that Moustafa, the money changer, had hired a magician to write a spell which would cause his death. He therefore sent word a second time to the Pasha, stating that the new secretary was guilty of this crime. The second secretary was brought before the Pasha and confessed that he had used malign arts and named the magician whom he had hired. The magician was arrested, and was unable to deny the charges brought against him and was thrown in jail, where he was sentenced to remain until it was seen whether or not the first Moustafa Ed-Digwee would die. He was in a small cell guarded by two soldiers. One night one of the guards fell asleep. The other heard a slight murmuring sound, and looked through the crack in the cell door. He saw the magician sitting in the middle of the floor muttering words which he could not understand. The candle which he had before him went out and four

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other candles appeared in each corner of the cell. The magician got to his feet and knocked his head three times on the wall. Each time he did this, the wall opened and a man appeared to come forth from it. After the magician had conversed with the three men he had brought forth, they disappeared, as well as the four candles; and the candle that was in the middle of the cell became lighted again, and the magician resumed his position on the floor, and all was quiet. In this way the spell that was meant to kill Ed-Digwee was dissolved. The next morning, the invalid was much improved, and soon went back to his former office.

* * *

MEXICAN HEAVEN

THE ancient Mexicans designated several destinations for their dead. Warriors killed in battle went to the sun, where they lived in bliss with the sun god. They believed that the offerings we on earth made to the sun god were accepted by the dead. After spending four years in this place, the souls were changed into birds with the most beautiful plumage. Then they flitted about sucking honey from the most fragrant flowers in Heaven and earth.

The Mexicans' conception of Tlalocan was a more material paradise, where grew the most tempting maize, tomatoes, calabashes, haricots. Here lived the god Tlaloc. Those who were admitted to this heaven were those whose deaths were caused even remotely by water or by lightning. Tlaloc was the god of water. This paradise was placed in the mountains where the souls enjoyed eternal summer.

The hell of the Aztec race was called Mictlan. It was presided over by Mictlantecutli and his wife, Mictecaciuatl. The souls who went to this hell were those who died of disease, unliked chiefs, and great persons. On the day of death the priest told the dying man that he was about to set forth to a region where "there is neither light nor window," a place reached by a hazardous route cluttered with grisly, obscene forms. When the soul reaches the court of Mictlan, he is instructed to offer his gifts, provided before cremation, to the lord of that region. The journey to the first of the nine hells took four years, over a deep river whose shores were lined with the dogs providently buried with the dead and used to help them across.

Above the nine hells of Mictlan were thirteen Heavens. The first one was made of planets, the second of demons, the third contained the four hundred stars of the Northern Hemisphere. The fourth was the home of the birds, the fifth contained the fire-snakes which we might have called comets. The sixth held the winds; the seventh, dust; and in the eighth, dwelt the gods. The higher ones contained the high gods; Tonacatecutli and his wife lived in the highest, or thirteenth Heaven.

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A Ticket to Paradise

By FRANCES YERXA

THE Moros have peculiar ways, especially their ability to fight. They never try to avoid trouble because their religion teaches that death in defense of the Faith gives them immediate entrance into Paradise which they picture as wonderful brothel and restaurant combined.

During the days of American occupation in Moro territory, we lost many men because of this belief. The Moros wanted to die but first they wanted to take as many nonbelievers as possible with them.

"Running amok" is another practice of the Moros. When one is so humiliated or bored that they wish to die, they use this practice. Since suicide is forbidden by the Koran, the amok forces his neighbors to kill him by trying to kill them first. Sometimes he kills many people before he comes upon one who is armed and ready to protect himself by killing the attacker.

* * *

MAGIC HEALING

By JUNE LURIE

ONE of the most remarkable books ever written on the subject of magic is the Magus. In it is an account of how to go about seeing images of spirits in the air. The formula is to mix together the gall of a man and the eyes of a black cat, and some other things. The same can be made of the blood of a lapwing, a bat and a goat; and if a smooth, shiny piece of steel is smeared with the juice of a mugwort, and be made to fume, it causes invocated spirits to appear. In the case of the colic, if a live duck is placed on the belly, the pain will go away and the duck will die. If a heart is taken out of an animal, and applied to a patient suffering with quartan fever, it drives the disease out of the body. If anyone swallows the heart of a lapwing, a bat, a swallow, a weasel, or a mole while it is still warm with natural heat, it improves his intellect and memory, and enables him to foretell things to come. The best rule when using parts of animals for magical purposes is to take them from the animal while it is still living and when possible to allow the animal to remain alive afterward. The right eye of a serpent applied to sore eyes cures them, if the serpent is let go alive. The tooth of a mole is a good cure for toothache, if the mole is turned loose.

* * *

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THE BOMB OUT OF SPACE

An Impossible But True Feature . . .

By A. MORRIS & JAMES B. SETTLES

(See Back Cover)

In the Western part of the United States, in the state of Arizona, there is a phenomenon of nature known as Crater Mountain. For years scientists have been speculating on the origin of this famous landmark. The cavity in the mountain is about 3,800 feet across, reaching a depth of almost 600 feet. To form a crater of this size, was, scientists agree, a herculean feat of old Mother Nature. But just how the trick was accomplished the same scientists have not entirely agreed upon.

The largest consensus of opinion, and probably the more likely, is that at some time in the distant past a huge mass of meteoric material hurtled out of space, much like a super-interstellar bomb, and crashed into the mountain in what we now know as the state of Arizona. The resulting collision was so intense that the mountain was literally torn asunder, leaving as an aftermath, the huge jagged crater that our eyes can witness today. The force of that collision was so intense that tons of molten rock were thrown as far as one mile, and possibly more, from the cataclysm. This is borne out from recent scientific research in the area where blocks of limestone, corresponding to the same material in the immediate vicinity of Crater Mountain were found a mile and more away. All of this data has been used to determine the probability of a meteoric crash.

As to the exact time of this collision from outer space, there is even more speculation. About the safest estimate made so far is that it occurred at least "a great many" centuries ago. Other estimates have run as far as a hundred million years ago. If this last estimate is true, then the incident occurred at a time when giant reptiles ruled the Earth. It is indeed likely that many of them perished in the cataclysm, and ever more likely that the sight was witnessed by many more of them. One can only speculate as to what thoughts, if any, traversed their embryonic minds when the flaming meteor screamed down from the sky in a howling torrent of flame and fury. An impossible fact, but true. . . .

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